

Maohden Vol. 1

Hideyuki Kikuchi

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MAHALKIDEN 1

PREQUEL TO
YASHAKIDEN

written by
**Hideyuki
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illustrated by
**Jun
Suemi**



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Author's Note

Of all my stories set in Demon City, *Maohden* may be the one most devoted to the city itself. I don't imagine that another one of my stories will be so dedicated to Shinjuku. The city here becomes a stage designed and constructed with my own pen. I have done my best to not subtract in the slightest from intricate qualities of the real thing.

The true protagonists in this story will always be those of you equally captivated by Shinjuku.

Author's Bio

The publication of *Makaiko* in 1985 elevated Hideyuki Kikuchi to the ranks of bestselling authors.

He was born in 1949 in the city of Choshi in Chiba Prefecture. As a child, he dreamed of becoming a manga artist. While studying law at Aoyama University he participated in the campus' "mystery and detective novel" club. After graduation, he published stories in doujinshi magazines and translated science fiction while working as a magazine reporter.

Hideyuki Kikuchi's debut as a novelist came in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*. He has since been unrivaled in his ability to create entertaining and compelling heroes.

About *Maohden*, Vol. I, the author happily complains, "The plot turns are coming one after the other, pushing the story in directions not even I can predict."

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Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
JUN SUEMI

English Translation by
Eugene Woodbury



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English Edition Published by:

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING

A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300

Gardena, CA 90248

USA

www.dmpbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request

First Edition: June 2012

ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-149-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada



M A G I C A R T H D E M O N S 1

Part One: Black Magic Burial

Chapter One

The black shadows oozed through the milky white world. The creamy folds of light and dark traced the outlines of human beings, in the blink of an eye growing thicker and thinner, the silhouettes appearing at once recognizable, and in a blink not there at all.

There were two shadows in the mist.

One tall and thin, like a sword sporting arms and legs. The other short and stooped over.

Where was this place? Looking more closely, larger structures could be made out around them—a round tower, a three-sided pyramid, a four-sided pyramid—all wearing the fog like a heavy cloak.

And many more. Shadows beyond the shadows. Beyond and beyond.

What seemed at first a disordered, random collection of objects followed an intricate geometry that only the most skilled of architects—the rare genius with a well-attuned aesthetic sense—could begin to grasp.

Beauty was born of evil as well as good, like a flower blossoming in a vase of blood. The swirling mists bore an eerie aura on their wavering currents, a haunted miasma whose breath would reduce a normal man to a quivering mass in a minute.

This was no normal place.

In these fog-shrouded precincts, the air grew thick with the spirits of the dead. It inflicted no great harm on its residents. Those who went to work day after day in the midst of it—laborers or murderers alike—might shave three hours off their life spans for every day they spent there. Now and then, cough up blood and end up confined to their bed for two or three weeks.

But they weren't the true residents of these streets in the first place.

Anticipating that sightseers would become an important source of revenue, the forward-looking mayor was already spelling out environmental restoration and violence abatement campaigns. Though actual implementation was still on the drawing boards, operations were underway that would ensure its eventuality.

A voice rang out. Only a voice. But a voice devoid of every speck of personality or even mechanical individuality.

"I will soon die," it said.

The statement was suffused with bleakness. There was no telling which one of them had spoken. Perhaps the mist itself had coughed it out.

“But the end is not yet nigh. As long as this city exists—as long as *you* are with me—as long as you have *him*.”

His head slumped on his shoulders. Not an expression of despair, he was looking down at his feet, at a rectangular box nine feet long, over four and a half feet wide, and three feet high. The purpose of this ominous object was not immediately apparent.

There should have been no reason to worry had it been only an ordinary box. Except that the surface was intricately etched and carved. The lid, marked by seams finer than thread, was sealed with an electronic lock.

The center of the lid was inlaid with the golden head of a goat. A vine of magical mandrake root wove around its horns, hung down and was bound beneath the beard of its chin.

It was a crest. Especially in this city, it seemed improbable that any family would lend its name to such an accursed crest. The goat and the mandrake vine were unmistakable marks of evil.

This was a casket.

And who had sought eternal repose in this nine foot box of a bedchamber?

“I have bet everything on fifteen years hence.” His voice rose again. “All I can say for certain is that this city will still exist. Beyond that is darkness and uncertainty. We will see if the odds of winning turn in your favor. The present circumstances are not to your advantage. Only time and this city can tell whether the dark gods of victory will smile upon your karmic enemies, or whether your blood will ultimately triumph.”

The voice turned toward the heavens, toward a world sealed away from the moon and the stars and even the darkness. “One life winks out. One life slumbers. The life that awakens will surely not be heaven sent. Let us proceed.”

The other silhouette retreated, not moving a hand or foot, as if sliding backwards on ice. At the same time, a heavy thud came from the feet of the speaker. Something like ink spread out and tinted the color of that world.



The man had literally lost his head. Blood erupted into the air. The headless man leaned over and picked up the head with bloodstained hands.

An unimaginable will to live and powers of mind propelled him forward. As soon as he raised his arms level with the ground, he pitched forward as his legs gave out beneath him.

His hands reached out to the casket, bringing the head down squarely in the center of the crest. A moment later, the fallen body stretched out on the earth. It didn't move again.



A metallic sound like a great gong rang out deep below the surface. The head coming to rest on the crest had thrown a switch, or the ritual itself pulled the trigger. A moment later the apparatus holding the casket and the paved surface surrounding it slowly sank down into the earth.

The concrete gave way to walls of black earth as it slipped down the dark shaft. The eyes of the head sitting on the coffin suddenly opened.

“In fifteen years, this city will become an accursed metropolis like no other. Our plans shall bloom in the midst of that poison. Wait and see, Renjo Aki. You and that son of yours. I will return again.”

The eyes turned white, rolled back in the head. Now as lifeless as the mysterious casket it rode upon, the several hundred square yards of ground sank deep beneath the earth.

Standing at the edge of the large hole, the mists wrapped around him, the shadow silently backed away, holding a remote control device in his right hand. His fingers played across the surface. The earth rocked powerfully beneath his feet.

There were no buildings around him. But no native soil would be found anywhere in these city blocks. Only thick layers of asphalt. Now it quaked and rumbled and rose up. Excavated by enormous forces, the black interior peeked out from the fractured surface.

Like a subterranean dragon had arced its back and thrown one of its scales skyward.

The figure leveraged a portion of that power and flew into the air. He harrowed his eyes and concentrated his attention on the deep shaft

below him. If his calculations proved true, the layers of earth and asphalt would form an impregnable vault that would ward off any attempts to unearth it for the next fifteen years.

He set back on the ground as the fissures raced toward him. Uncertainty only briefly colored those steady eyes. At the last second, he flew into the air. When he landed, no less nimbly, it was like he'd landed on eggshells.

Landing a second time, neither did the ground reflect the impact of breaking his fall. The hollowed-out earth had been tamed by the enormous power he wielded.

Whatever the results, they were already beyond his control. The only options left to anyone would have to wait fifteen years. And now even he looked tired. As if noticing the damp, clinging fog for the first time, he rubbed the back of his neck.

An angry yelp rang out in the air. A black dog sprang onto the road a dozen feet off to his right, baring its fangs, a good six feet long. He reached his hand into his pocket and drew it out. The legs of the dog spasmed. It fell over dead. Blood gushed from between its spear-like fangs.

This was not a city where a man could ever let down his guard. The shadow sensed a number of malevolent presences within the mist. Slashes of green encircled him. Behind them, more loomed further back in the shadows.

A pack of wild dogs. Efforts to exterminate these man-eating animals had not reached this particular block. Knowing the danger, it made for a perfect place to dump a body.

The black masses closed on him at an incredible velocity. He soared over their heads.

In the midst of this silent attack and counterattack, the pack did not swarm around the canine corpse already on the road. Attacking him surely meant they hadn't already eaten their fill. But they seemed to possess the intellect, uncrazed by the smell of blood, to fix their attention on the second meal before them.

The shadow landed on a crumbling wall. The concrete cracked beneath his feet. He didn't lose his balance for an instant. Beyond the wall were the ruins of a factory.

He set off running. Two dogs jumped up at him from below. His right hand flashed. The two dogs died. By the time the bodies crashed to the ground, he had sprinted to another wall a dozen yards off.

A ferocious roar reached his ear. The additional feast of flesh and blood finally overwhelmed the animals' instincts. Shaking off their pursuit, the shadow disappeared into the mists.

A few minutes later, only bloodstains and shards of bone were left to tell the tale. Watery light slanted across the road. A new day had dawned in the city.

Rising out of the thinning haze, the Keio Plaza Hotel was the first skyscraper to catch the morning sun—in a metropolis where, only a mile or so from the new city center, man-eating animals ran rampant.

Demon City Shinjuku.

Biding its time until that multi-dimensional showdown fifteen years hence, it calmly welcomed yet another one of its same-old accursed days.

Part Two: Beautiful Genie

Chapter One

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the Lauren Knights hostess club in Kabuki-cho welcomed its most interesting visitor since its opening.

The customer on his way out was demanding a refund. One of the employees, Noriko Toyoshi, was having a few words with him. "What the hell you are bitching about?" she demanded. "The way you were copping feels right and left, we gave a little perv like you a bargain deal."

The time was 3:52.

Taking her raised voice as a cue, the bartender and bouncer joined the party. By the time they'd wrestled their displeased guest to the ground, thrashed him soundly and tossed him out on his ear, it was a little past 3:56.

He landed with his face on the ground a couple of yards out the back entrance.

"Take a hike, mister!" Noriko hocked a loogie onto his back. "And don't come back!" An old-fashioned send-off, to be sure.

It was 3:59.

With the man's finger—torn off at some point during the melee—clenched between her teeth like a cigar, she was heading back inside when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She glanced over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of *that* face.

It was exactly four o'clock.

The sepia light of early summer stained the falling dusk. *O-magatoki* it was called, the time when ghosts and demons prowled the earth. Probably not a coincidence either.

Noriko froze in her tracks. A long shadow fell on the earth in front of her.

"Ah, is this where I can find Ryo Terumoto-san?"

The drawling voice burrowed inside Noriko's head and chased the golden sunset away.

"Who-who are you?" she finally managed to say. The echoes of desire thickly layered her words. She was in the business of arousal but she was the one getting wet.

Whether he knew that or not—the blank tone of his words didn't change in the slightest—"Where might I find Terumoto-san?"

"You mean, the boss?"

“Yes.”

It was strictly against the rules to give out the name and address of the owner to strangers. But all these taboos had flown out the window as soon as she saw his face. If he asked, she would have stripped naked and gotten herself off in broad daylight.

“The boss—he’s chasing some skirt in the green room on the second floor. What’s this about?”

A ferocious bark of anger made her turn around. “Stupid bitch! You don’t tell shit like that to a perfect—”

The bouncer’s admonition cut off mid-sentence. He’d been lingering at the back entrance. A flush rose to his ashen cheeks. Noriko felt a flash of jealousy. He too was entranced by the man’s spell.

“W-What do you want?” But even this cross-examination was colored by an air of fawning.

“Upstairs, was it? If you would excuse me.”

The silhouette moved. The man was dressed in black. Bathed in the listless sunlight, the turned-up collar of his black slicker suggested being caught in a cutting winter wind. It was the two lowlifes who felt the chill.

A head taller than the five-foot-six bouncer, he disappeared down the hallway. The two stepped aside, as if pushed by an invisible force. The visitor silently climbed the stairs. By the time he got to the steel door identified with a nameplate as the “Ladies Green Room,” a flurry of footsteps sounded out behind him.

“Son of a bitch! You wait right there!”

“Take us for fools, do you? Turn around and face the music, bud!”

The same number of shouts as the pairs of footsteps. A moment later, they fell silent.

The visitor turned around. The next sound was of them all swallowing hard.

Caught in the light streaming in from the end of the hall, the young man’s comely countenance took on an almost ultraviolet glow.

Beneath brows like slender willow leaves, their stupefied faces reflected in his narrow eyes. The chiseled bridge of his nose—white teeth flashing between faintly crimson lips—his entire being wrapped in a savage yet mysterious aura—this was an object of rare beauty, as if sculpted by the gods.

It was almost remarkable that it didn’t strike the grubby eyes of these thugs blind. And yet there somehow arose from his expansive, boundless presence a quite mismatched sense of amiable humanity.

“Listen, you—” But the strangled threats uttered by the head underling carried little force in them.

“I’m here from the Aki Detective Agency,” the young man said. “Two days ago, a girl came here from outside the ward. The word is that she’s making appearances here, apparently against her will. I have a few

questions, that's all."

"A few questions?" bellowed the stocky enforcer bringing up the rear. "Come here and tell me about it, pretty boy. We'll sit our two asses down and get to know each other. Or maybe I'll just set *your* ass down and get to know *it* a whole lot better."

He licked his lips, expressing less a jest than raw desire. The lewd aroma punctuated the violent atmosphere. The men lurched forward, their eyes hot and vacant.

A hardly human groan spilled from those lips. Only once. The men froze in their tracks, a good ten of them, all reaching for their throats, tearing at the invisible in a strange kind of pantomime.

These frantically struggling ruffians, who otherwise thought no more of another human's life than they would an insect's, had been rendered literally blue in the face.

The young man—Aki was his name—smiled languidly back at them. A warm smile, utterly unaffected by the grotesque scene before him.

"I can't let anyone interfere with my work. Take it easy, okay? A word of warning—put up too much of a struggle and your heads may drop right off. Consider yourselves lucky to have faced off against me, and not *me*."

With a look like a mischievous child giving the slip to a gang of bullies, he placed his hand on the door knob. The door was locked from the inside. He appeared momentarily perplexed, but tried again—as if he'd been mistaken the first time.

The door opened without a sound.

As the door opened, a man's cajoling voice could be heard, along with a woman's moans—that might sound like cries of pain at first, but came from an entirely different source.

The young man slipped inside the room.

It was a ten tatami mat room, approximately a dozen feet square. The tiny concrete-lined *genkan* held a girl's sandals and the owner's very expensive black patent leather shoes. The shoes were polished to a shine and reflected the fluorescent lights in the ceiling.

The thick smell of sweat assailed his nostrils. The walls were lined with utilitarian mirrors and lockers. In the front was a household Shinto shrine. The two other people in the room were right below it.

Between the pair of white thighs waving back and forth through the air, an altogether stranger sight humped in and out of view—the bottom half of a wild animal covered with black, coarse hair. And the gray soles of his feet and the black claws of his toes.

The beast's lower extremities busily drove her forward and back, pressing the lithesome girl's body hard against the tatami. Huffing ragged breaths while totally devoted to the task at hand was a bear.

Not a man in a bear outfit. The bloodshot eyes, the gleaming snout, the yellow fangs protruding from the gaping mouth—this was the real

thing.

The slender face of the girl beneath him was painted with less a look of fear than a half-crazed expression, staring in a daze at the ceiling. Her breasts and chest were smeared with blood. The red lines crisscrossed her skin. Every time her body shuddered and shook, the bright red blood welled up and the stain spread.

The bear's claws had left their marks.

Beside them, two outfits had been discarded on the floor—a red dress and a polo shirt and pants and underwear, the latter belonging to the bear.

The girl raised a muffled moan. The bear's snout covered her mouth, trying to kiss her. A feral maw accosting human lips.

She shut her mouth and turned her face away. The animal pursued her, the pink tongue playing with her lips. The dripping jaws covering her face from chin to nose, she finally opened her mouth.

The tongue dove in, swishing from cheek to cheek, the spit and spittle spilling out of the corners of their mouths.

The girl coughed violently.

“Okay, okay, let's call it a day,” the young man said, as if bored with the show.

The bear stopped moving, and slowly turned his head and growled, eyes flashing. This was no mere animal. Such a degree of loathing and anger could only be associated with the human species.

With a roar to wake the dead, the creature sprang apart from the woman with a wet *pop*, the sound made by something damp being pulled out of a tight space. The bear's dark red manhood jutted out, the size of two fists, drenched with her come, not having come himself.

He rose to his feet, five foot eleven or so, the same height as the young man. His width though—the mass of his frame—its hulking presence—was another matter. He must've weighed over four hundred pounds. A swipe with a single one of his fingernails could disembowel a horse. A single bite with its row of dagger-like teeth could take a man's head clean off. Though slow and clumsy standing on two legs, when running on all fours, he could easily reach a speed of twenty-five miles per hour. And climb trees like no other four-footed animal could.

An unarmed man coming face to face with this animal could only hope to stare it down and slowly back away. If it came to a fight, the only way out would be to win its confidence—and then hack out its heart with a hatchet.

But the man at the door didn't appear to have a gun or a hatchet or a knife. Yet not a flicker of fear rose to his impassive face.

The bear answered with a growl that shook the window panes.

The young man smiled. “I don't believe we've met,” he said with a slight nod, addressing the bear with the same insouciant attitude. He produced a photograph and compared it to the girl on the floor. “The

very woman I've been looking for. She'll be leaving with me. Please don't interfere. That would only make things more difficult for all of us. I'll be contacting you tomorrow with an account number to which you will transfer sufficient funds to compensate her for any pain and suffering. Good day."

The bear had likely never been spoken to so brazenly in its life. It stood there dumbfounded as the young man strode unconcernedly toward him.

"Step aside, Terumoto-san," he said.

Instead, the bear took a wicked swipe at him, fully intending to ruffle that unruffled face. A black swirl of wind, a death-dealing, knockout punch.

The wind split in two. The former half slid off the vector aimed right at his head and flew at an oblique angle and slammed into the wall with a loud *thud*! The claws of the paw dug into the wood paneling—sans the rest of the arm.

The bear howled. A shower of blood spurted from around the claws pressed against the miraculously-severed stump. The beast reared back. Changes arose in the outlines of its huge frame.

The fur grew lighter in color, shortened. The body shrank as well, turning into a different living thing.

"Son of a *bitch*!"

A shout mingled with pain and articulated after a very *human* fashion. The speaker launched a backhand blow at the young man with the hand covering the wound. It never connected. The arm from the elbow down tumbled through the air.

Ducking the arcing splash of blood, the young man knelt down next to the girl. She was lying on her back and gasping for breath. He'd pulled the red dress over her shoulders when a crash rang out behind him.

The bear toppled over in the *genkan*. The impact was much lighter than expected.

The young man picked up the girl and was getting to his feet when he reached out with his left hand and caught something falling through the air. The bear's hand—though this was clearly a human forearm.

Drained of blood, it turned as gray as the concrete of the *genkan*. The young man tossed it aside. It landed in a big trash can in the corner of the room. It'd give the janitor a start to be sure, but refuse was refuse.

With even strides, he stepped down into the *genkan*. The bear paw sticking to the wall revealed its true form and dropped to the concrete floor.

"If you would excuse me," he said, nudging aside the obstructing body in front of him with the tip of his boot.

The bear was gone. Lying in the round pool of blood was a small, thin man in his late thirties or early forties. The owner of the hostess

club and boss of the Terumoto Gang, Ryo Terumoto. The ashen face suggested there was little chance of keeping the Grim Reaper at bay.



He lifted his head. His bloodshot eyes—the only part of him that

retained any vestiges of the bear—shot a piercing glare through the younger man’s back.

“*Bastard—wait—*” A barely human voice suffused with bitter maledictions. “Too bad for you—I injected her with so much aphrodisiac—right where it counts—*heh*—no treatment can keep up with it—*heh*—didn’t know she had a man waiting out there—she’s dead to that world—a creature of this city now—”

The young man didn’t move for a minute or two, digesting what Terumoto was saying. Contemplating this final retribution, his face twisted into a wicked smile of death.

Like stop motion, the smile froze on his face. The young man looked back at him. Nothing about his countenance had changed in the slightest. Nevertheless, Terumoto’s consciousness, already starved of blood, awoke to a new sense of fear, his terrorized instincts confirming the impossible turn of events in front of him.

This was a different person.

“Too bad, then, that you have met *me*,” the young man said, the warmth of his voice alone growing icy cool. A *me* that was not *him*. “Death from blood loss would at least be a peaceful one. But you should leave this world with a clear view of hell.”

Before he’d finished speaking, the air hummed. Before the air stopped humming, the armless Terumoto’s body jumped up. Having already lost half of their functioning in the drowsy prelude to death, the nerves of the naked body lit up with a charge of pain like nothing in this world.

Being driven mad by the pain was reward enough. That in fact was what happened—he was sucked into the whirlpool of chaos—and a moment later the pain itself had restored him to “normal.”

The young man paused to gaze grimly upon the gangster, writhing wordlessly, weeping from the unending agony, and opened the door. The underlings from before were below him, still bound hand and foot. He said, “You are in my way.”

Whatever they saw, the sight erased the pain and stiffened their expressions in fear. One by one, those heads rolled onto the floor, throwing off pinwheels of blood.

The fountains streaked through the air, painting the floor and the walls. The blue air was filled with the golden dusk. The only sound amidst the quiet carnage came from that beautiful genie’s footsteps.

The footsteps stopped halfway down the flight of stairs. A woman clung to the wall like a pretty moth seeking the flame.

Noriko gasped, “You—you—pulled off—something like this—without a scratch—I felt it like—unbelievable—I—*ahhh*—” Her hands reached up her skirt, caressing herself with ecstatic gyrations, getting herself off on the death and blood and beauty.

Strange but true, a girl in her profession who didn’t trip out on blood and beauty in this city was the oddity. The young man continued on

down the stairs without sparing her a second glance.

“Hey—you—” Noriko called out. Absorbed in her self-gratification, the pleasure flowing forth from her dripping fingertips, the sensations amplified all the more by the appalling scene surrounding her, her voice took on a heightened timbre. “You’re just gonna leave like this? For the love of God, kill me—like them—when I can feel it like this—and die like that—*ahh*—”

He reached the landing and started toward the back entrance. Behind him, the crimson fountains collapsed into streams and flowed down the stairs. If nothing else, the blood of the gangsters was beautiful.

With this accursed and bewitching scene as the backdrop, the man in black strolled indifferently into the sunset.

“Wait—wait—please—” Arching her back as her self-ministrations continued unabated, Noriko cried out in a strained voice, “Please—tell me—your name.”

The light streaming in through the door cast his long shadow on the floor. It was like the answer welled up out of it.

“Setsura Aki.”

Chapter Two

One particular group of tall buildings in Shinjuku had taken on a strange and abominable existence. This still-standing grove of skyscrapers was most famously identified by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex.

Right now was the *O-magatoki*, that bewitched time of the day that lasted from four o'clock to five-thirty in the afternoon. The shadows of the skyscrapers reached all the further and fell on the earth.

As a case in point, behind the Shinjuku NS building was the three and a half acre site of the former Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, soaring forty-eight stories into the sky. Its shadow fell across Chuo Park to the west and reached halfway across the Yonchome block in West Shinjuku.

The sun setting in the west threw shadows across buildings further to the west—impossible anywhere but here.

The air was thick with sprites and miasmas playing practical jokes on Mother Nature, altogether befitting to the Shinjuku dusk. If they could do that, what else might they have up their sleeves?

This was the time of day when pedestrians quickened their pace. Here and there came the sound of shutters closing and doors locking. The old and established shops run by grumpy and stubborn old men were no exception.

Panicked shouts rent the air, probably sightseers who hadn't bothered to read the fine print in the Shinjuku Tourist Association's indemnity clause. Now they had no choice at this point but to fork over a chunk of money and seek refuge in the closest shop or home—with only five minutes or so to conclude negotiations.

Any longer and they'd stand a good chance of being robbed blind or else suffer a worse fate.

The hems of his black slicker fluttering in the wind, Setsura Aki got home exactly three minutes after every other house in the neighborhood had battened down the hatches. The marquee on which the name of the establishment was written in the old cursive kanji style—*Aki Senbei*—shook as he brought down the shutters with a bang.

In a corner of Yonchome in West Shinjuku, Mina Chiaki, the secretary for the Aki Detective Agency, said with a smile, "Nick of time. Though I

suppose you would have been fine even if you didn't race home in time. There's always a room for you at the Hilton, double bed."

"Hard to believe such a pretty face can say such things," Setsura said, lightly rubbing his hands together.

Around twenty, as capable as she was shapely (which was to say, very), she'd hit him with her stinging rejoinders a mere two hours after he hired her. The patter hadn't abated since.

"How many do you think will buy it today?"

Avoiding the pointed look directed at him, Setsura brought his face up to the peephole and opened the iris. Somewhere in the house, the HVAC system kicked on.

"Well, looks like two are going down outside the White Tiger Sushi Emporium. Seems the owner's going to take pity on them, but only because he's a greedy SOB. If they're lucky, he'll settle for what's in their wallets."

Checking to make sure the bald man had dragged the two sightseers inside the shop, Setsura snapped the fisheye lens closed.

The temperature inside the house was maintained at sixty-five degrees. But outside, in the shadow of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex, the temperature could be expected to plunge to zero and colder.

From four o'clock in the afternoon to five-thirty, the long shadows of the buildings fell on Setsura's house and the rest of the neighborhood. In the span of five minutes, the temperature sank to ten below.

When the morning broke, the same thing happened in the blocks opposite. This was no explicable weather pattern, but (it was theorized) a chemical change wrought in the air by a species of ghostly miasma that lingered there in the city center.

In any case, during those hours of the day where the shadows fell, the man-eating dogs and carnivorous rats kept their distance as well. The mortality rate had been kept to zero for the past several years. Those who did freeze to death were already suffering from some unknown debilitating condition unrelated to the temperature of the air.

Get caught for five minutes in the shadows and a man could be revived; ten minutes and it'd take a good six months of rehabilitation; twenty minutes and the mental and physical scars from frostbite were permanent; thirty minutes and the odds of recovery were slim to none.

This strange phenomenon, confined to this part of Shinjuku, was known as the "Government Freezer."

"How did work go?" Mina asked in a singsong voice.

Mina had the kind of finely-formed features that would make any man or woman take a second and a third look, easily mistaken for those belonging to the top fashion models. And yet in terms of simple aesthetics, it did not best those of her employer.

"It went," Setsura said with a nod. "I just came from the hospital. A

nasty yakuza injected this girl with an aphrodisiac. It's going to take some serious treatment to overcome. A bunch of chelation treatments and she should be able to resume a normal life."

"You mean you took her to see Doctor Mephisto?"

"The same."

A flicker of concern showed on Mina's Noh mask of a face. Only Setsura and their close friends could grasp the ominous nature of such a reaction. The smile on her employer's face suggested he was amused by this reaction. He turned to a glass case on his left and opened the top.

"No eating the merchandise," she said, her hand reaching to his mouth.

He bit into the hard-baked, five-inch wafer with a dry, crunching sound.

"No problem. I'll pay up. That'd be, uh—"

The price tag on the case said "Eighty yen each." The calligraphy used on the tag had a magical quality that drew the attention of customers who cared little for the art.

He took silver and copper coins from a black leather coin purse and tossed them into the register behind the display case.

The fifteen foot by fifteen foot shop interior housed two rows of glass cases, each sectioned into thirds, and four glass jars on the shelves behind them. Including the cash register and checkout counter, there wasn't much room left to maneuver.

Considering the "work" he'd just been up to, it was almost unimaginable that he'd come home to a little place like this. And yet this was one of Shinjuku's venerable old shops.

It wasn't listed in the visitor's brochures distributed by the ward government or in handbooks published outside the ward, such as the *Shinjuku Tourist Guide* and *Shinjuku Register of Historical Places*. Nevertheless, they had a solid base of customers who appreciated the taste of homemade *senbei*.

The shop had been established on the fourteenth of September, the day after the Devil Quake. This was its fifteenth year. That made it the oldest shop in Demon City. But including the time it'd been in business before the Devil Quake, the total came to a century and a half.

"Any new jobs?" Setsura asked, crunching on the *senbei* as he stepped up from the shop to a small, six-tatami mat room.

"None presently," said Mina. She raised the small, Japanese-style teapot and filled a cup with a pale green stream.

She'd just brewed it in the kitchen nook off to the left. There was, to be sure, the standard electric teapot. But the young proprietor would only drink fresh-brewed tea made the old-fashioned way, and the cool young secretary didn't complain. It was all about harmony in the workplace.

Mina, on the other hand, had between her lips a long straw, the other

end of which was immersed in a glistening tall glass of orange juice. Hard to say which drink was more appropriate for the month of June in a place like this.

“No jobs, but a few bits of interesting information.”

“Oh?” His voice welled up as languidly as the steam rising from the teacup.

“Something’s afoot in the upper ranks of Kurusu Real Estate. Seems the Munakata Brothers are on the move.”

“The Scorpion and the Adder, eh? If something’s afoot, the most likely target would be me.”

“Nothing’s been confirmed.”

“Well, if they’re the ones I’m up against, I won’t have to worry about RPGs and lasers and the like. Or the shop getting burned to the ground.”

“And you shouldn’t have to worry about me either, right?”

“Sorry, but starting tomorrow would be a good time to take a holiday.”

“No way. We’re hardly breaking even this month as is.”

“If you got kidnapped, there’d be no telling when the cavalry would arrive.”

Mina stared at her orange juice. “I’ll camp out here, then. Permission to break out the heavy artillery?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Setsura sipped at his tea. Here in this peaceful little living room, the talk was all about mobsters and militias. “Anybody else?”

“I can’t say for sure, but the Shiragi Syndicate and Sanbo Group are mobilizing. The Shiragis seem to be using their own underlings. The Sanbo Group has the word out to the freelancers. That much I have confirmed.”

“Oh, good grief.”

He reached into a nearby bowl of *Shinagawa maki* and popped two or three into his mouth. The movement of his hand was as refined as the *senbei*.

The three gangs Mina had mentioned were generally considered the best of the two or three hundred headquartered in Shinjuku, hence his exasperated tone of voice.

“After this, I’m going to have to start checking to see if the grandma at the newsstand is really her.”

“Artificial skin really is getting that difficult to tell from the real thing,” Mina coolly and precisely pointed out. “Besides, in this city, just because a person is old doesn’t mean there’s anything *normal* about them. Watch your step.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Setsura said, staring up at the ceiling.

Mina glanced toward the *genkan*. The allure of such a well-proportioned face could not be exaggerated, the kind that made women mull over the possibilities, and any man but a saint seriously consider

becoming a switch-hitter.

“A car?” Setsura asked.

Mina nodded. Though how she knew that wasn’t immediately obvious. The sound outside was no louder than wind fluttering through the leaves of a tree.

“Arriving at this time of day, they gotta be chemically enhanced or cyborgs.”

“Six of one, half dozen of the other, if you’re who they’re after. I don’t see any simple solutions in store.”

“You’re telling me.”

Setsura drained his teacup and grimaced. Too hot. But that countenance of his didn’t lose any of its cool.

The four men were on edge. As seasoned pros, they had full confidence in their own abilities, and an inkling of what their foe had to offer as well. Though they hadn’t tangled with him before, they’d all heard the rumors. Even in this city, those rumors stretched credibility. And yet while pouring scorn upon them, these men couldn’t shake that sense of unease, the cold chill that ran down their backs whenever somebody mentioned his name.

Still, dealing with him should be a piece of cake.

Their weapons this evening told the tale. They carried recoil-less .44 auto Magnums. They had Uzi submachine guns loaded with 2.5 mm exploding rounds or 12 gauge Winchester auto shotguns slung at the hips of their Arctic combat suits. Two of them had hand grenades and incendiaries pinned to their flak jackets. The weapons were all lubricated with synthetic oil good to minus sixty degrees Celsius.

More than enough firepower to eliminate most targets. And to literally clean up afterwards, the last man in the detail held a long, thin nozzle. The other end connected to a canister on his waist. The burning mixture of high pressure oxygen and nitromethane gas could shoot out six hundred feet at six thousand degrees, reducing anything in its path to cinders.

Were-humans using shape-shifting drugs that turned them into bears or tigers couldn’t withstand such a blast.

The eyes in the middle of their faces, covered by a mask and goggles, didn’t brim with the tenacity of the hunter, nor even that of a killer, but rather with an eerie mechanical vibe.

But they hadn’t made it a dozen feet from the car when they began having second thoughts. The Arctic combat suits, including a thermal layer that would generate heat from any kind of pressure or movement, were guaranteed to hold up in the shade of the “Government Freezer.” But that didn’t extend to whatever was *inside* them.

While all these measures kept the epidermis warm, the cold seeped

into the marrow of their bones. Unluckily for them, none of them had actually experienced this environment before. And the bad luck didn't end there. A dozen feet in front of the shop, a shadow floated down from the sky like a bird of death and alit on the ground.

Confronted by both the unexpected appearance and beauty of the target they were after, these seasoned pros momentarily forgot why they were there and failed to pull the trigger.

Lowering his arms as if to bat down the flare of his slicker, Setsura Aki turned to face the assassins. He said, as if greeting colleagues at a business convention, "You're from the Shiragi Syndicate, I take it?"

Their white breath clouded the air. Behind the goggles, their eyes wavered.

"My secretary filled me in on the details, though it's not exactly news to me. Tonomura's got guts, I'll give him that. I didn't think he was *this* reckless, though."

Tonomura, the man who'd ordered the hit. His men stood there as if sincerely interested in everything Setsura had to say before opening fire.

"That'd make you the best of his black ops squad, meaning you take your orders directly from him. So I'll ask you—did somebody recently pay Tonomura a visit?"

Setsura turned his eyes to the second man on his left, holding the Winchester shotgun. "How about you?"

Like he was answering the plea of his prey on the verge of death, the man said in a gravelly voice, "I—don't know—really—"

"Next! And you?"



The man on the far left sported a ghastly white face. "This morning—a guy arrived—the secretary told me—that's all—I know—"

Setsura nodded, apparently taking them at their word. "What sort of

person was this guy?"

Like a teacher quizzing his students. Or more like the students quizzing their teachers. And seemingly equally unaware of how the tables had turned, the murderers' mouths again moved.

"Twenty or so—pale—thin—a mole next to his mouth—"

Setsura's reaction was a flicker in the depths of those endless dark eyes. "Fifteen years," he murmured. His voice sounded no less far away. "This game of hide and go seek has gone on way too long. There's hardly enough time to tie up all the loose ends. We're really going to have to shutter the business for a while."

He cast a glance at the men. They stood there like statues. "Disposing of you like this would hardly tax my wiles. I'll give you a fair shot. I'm going to take the customary ten paces down this street. Ten paces. After that, feel free to fire away. Or not. Whether I turn around. Or not. You'll be able to move soon enough."

With that, he turned his back to them and started walking. At the same time, the binding cords immobilizing them dissolved away. Mutual glances of disbelief gave way to white-hot anger coursing through their limbs to their trigger fingers.

Setsura hadn't gone five steps.

But their fingers didn't move. That *something* in the cold had seeped down to the bone and muscle. They'd spent too much time in the shade.

They all closed their eyes. Not out of fear. They entered a state of autohypnosis, the mind separated from the body. No longer under the conscious control of the shooter, the finger pressed the trigger by sheer force.

Despite a caliber of 2.5 mm, the high explosive and fuses meant the lead projectiles would penetrate the body before exploding, leaving a hole behind the size of a cat's paw. The muscles, bones and organs shattered, the body bent back, a fusillade of buckshot came next.

The inertia recoil auto shotgun spat out a stream of double-ought buckshot, nine pellets per shell, shredding the flesh like a torn rag. Any vestiges of humanity still left were soon devoured by the six thousand degrees of fire.

And they all missed.

The lines of fire split the air, scorched the asphalt, and lit up the empty sky. The target wasn't even twenty feet away. Looking down at their hands, as if trying to ascertain the cause of the ineffectual assault, the black angel of death in front of them turned around.

With that same comely countenance. But the face of another.

"No. I said ten paces. You may execute your own penalties."

He raised his right hand. The five fingers spread out. Like a maestro conducting a string ensemble of death, the guns of his assailants again spat fire.

At each other.

Torsos cut in two by the exploding rounds, heads blown apart by the shotgun, and turned into flaming scarecrows—these were the assassins. The blood and flesh and smoke and flame danced along the cruel streets while Setsura Aki stared up at the sky, like a fresh-faced college student contemplating the mysteries of the universe.

The “Government Freezer” knew as well that this young man was an exception to its rules. He alone couldn’t be frozen.

Chapter Three

The middle of the night.

Not far from the Seibu Shinjuku Nakai Station, in front of the Sanbo Group building, the darkness congealed into the form of a handsome young man.

Setsura Aki.

His mist-shrouded countenance shone in the moonlight. Only what was *inside* was different.

He'd been told the Sanbo Group had put out a hit on him. It wasn't clear whether they were ones that wanted him erased, but considering what the Shiragi Syndicate had been up to that evening already, it was a safe bet.

The building reached into the black like a dark castle. The first four floors of the seven-story building were devoted to a game center, a massage parlor, and other diversions. The fifth floor and up held the offices of the Sanbo Group.

The building wasn't just another ferroconcrete structure. It was earthquake reinforced and equipped with blast walls that would withstand a direct hit from the latest handheld "Dart" missiles, the preferred weapon of choice in the terror trade.

A little over an inch in diameter and ten inches long—the size of an emergency flare—two or three could be hidden in a loose-fitting jacket. Equipped with the frequency agile radar option, they could evade electronic jamming and hit targets two miles away with precision.

For the old-school yakuza who located their headquarters in well-established buildings and locations, they were a terrific nuisance. As a result, gangs either relocated outside Shinjuku or rotated their operations among several safe houses on a daily basis. Or went totally mobile via high-speed data uplinks.

In any case, an office nailed down to a single location was definitely not the current fashion. Sanbo Group was one of the few remaining brick-and-mortar outfits.

Meaning that the outside walls were three layers thick, laminated with armor plating that could repel an attack with a missile or RPG. The radar site on the roof would calculate the coordinates from where the attack originated, and respond with surface-to-air and air-to-ground missiles launched from vertical silos.

Out of sight of pedestrian traffic, two installations of large-bore, triple-barrel, auto-targeting laser cannons would spit out invisible beams of searing light.

But what wrapped the building in an ominous air was not its defensive weapons systems, but a demonic aura that arose out of the miasmas lurking between the very molecules in the air. Or it was the miasma itself.

Which suggested as well that the earth had been cursed from its very creation. At three o'clock in the morning, those miasmas were all the denser and pervasive. This was the time when the human metabolism sank to its lowest ebb, when hopes yielded to despair, love to loathing, joy to sadness.

The time when Setsura Aki arrived.

He silently approached the lobby. The crunching from beneath his feet sounded like he was treading on frosty ground. With every step, sparkling stardust fell from the soles of his boots. The ground had turned to glass—the result of being heated to tens of thousands of degrees. Not a gradual process but in a single burst.

Scars left behind by a burst of laser power. The blast walls showed similar physical changes. Paint covered the damage left behind by older assaults, evidence of an ongoing arms race between offense and defense.

Paying it no mind, Setsura pushed open the glass doors and stepped into the *genkan*. The hardened steel shutters hadn't been lowered.

If a rival gang caught sight of this situation, the Sanbo Group would have been wiped off the face of the earth in two seconds flat.

The lobby lights glowed brightly inside the lobby, as if welcoming him. The whole thing was beyond belief. Only two reasons sprang to mind: the guards that night abandoned the building, or they'd given up trying to defend it. Either way, they'd bear the blame the rest of their lives.

Into the situation, at three o'clock in the morning, stepped Setsura Aki.

The first floor game center was empty. The garishly-painted American-style pinball machines and video arcade cabinets plastered with posters sat there like haunted tombstones in a grotesque graveyard.

Setsura crossed the room to the elevators at the back. The power was on. He pushed the up button. The doors opened, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. He got on. A few seconds later, he arrived at the seventh floor.

The hallway was filled with light.

Setsura walked with muffled footsteps. Quieter than any rubber soles. Silence uninterrupted by even a breath or a heartbeat. It was like a brilliant watchmaker had poured moonlight into the veins of a doll, wound the spring of a heart made from glass and paper, and this young man had stepped forth.

Turning the corners without hesitation, Setsura came to an ornate, ebony door. Though he'd only been there once before in his life, his memory proved precise. He grasped the brass doorknob.

He wasn't greeted by an electric pulse strong enough to fell an elephant, or a spurt of mustard gas. The door silently opened to the left and right, revealing the large director's office.

The lavish furnishings, the leather sofa and marble table, didn't seem at all fitting to a yakuza's headquarters.

Next to the window on the left was a large oak desk. Behind the desk was his host. The face beneath the shock of well-groomed blond hair sported an unusually hearty complexion. The build of his body suggested a sixtyish corporate president who was into sports and kendo.

However, his countenance and the vigor suffusing it—as if all the fat in his body had been boiled down and his face extruded from the lye—was hardly that of a company man.

Kanji Mitakara. The director of the Sanbo Group, that ruled over the northwest quadrant of Shinjuku. Their territory comprised the once quiet suburban neighborhoods and school zones from the Seibu Shinjuku line to Mejiro Boulevard, followed the cross streets to New Mejiro Boulevard, and traveled the length of Yamate Street, running through Kamiochiai, Nakaochiai and Shimo'ochiai.

This old man—it was said he could freeze a tiger in its tracks with a single look—stood at the head of an organization of five hundred “associates,” dealing in narcotics, prostitution and illegal weapons, and taking in seven billion yen a year.

He'd earned his livelihood in the black market for almost half a century without suffering so much as a scratch, his good luck and wariness making him a legend in Shinjuku. And now he threw the doors wide open and cast all precautions aside to greet this young man—just who was this Setsura Aki?

Setsura closed the door behind him and gave the old man a long look. “You look pretty drugged up to me.”

Kanji Mitakara nodded. His face was flushed, his intoxicated eyes moist. His pale lips moved, like a pair of willow leaves. “Yeah, I'm scared. Were you any other man in my line of business, hell, you could chew me up and spit me out and I'd die with a smile on my face.”

Fear and fierceness filled his voice, and it wasn't just the drugs. Setsura answered quietly, “And knowing that, you threw the first punch.”

The voice emerged from the shadows drifting there in the darkness, devoid of human emotion, as if those crystal clear eyes existed only to take in all the melodrama of life and communicate only the cold hard facts to the cerebral cortex.

“What about Shiragi and Kurusu?” Mitakara asked.

“Skedaddled. But I know where.”

A faint smile finally graced Mitakara's mouth. "Skedaddled, eh? Since the day I met you, I haven't thought about anything else. But them, they're still young, they've still attachments to this world. I have to hope you'll see them off one of these days."

"One of these days."

Mitakara flashed a broad, relieved smile. "Good to know. I'd really hate to take the trip by myself and leave them behind, no matter how much I may deserve it."

"So has Gento Roran returned?"

"That he has. Where has he been these fifteen years? No matter who you ask, nobody knows. But one thing's for certain—he wants your head on a platter. I told him the odds were against us pulling it off. He was going to have to settle things with you himself. And we wouldn't meet again."

Mitakara suddenly stopped speaking. His eyes brimmed. His lips trembled. He seemed caught up in a rapturous state.

"It is terrifying," he said, the words leaking from the corners of his mouth all the weaker and euphoric. "Anybody who sees you fight regrets it, and now resents those who sleep soundly at night having not seen what they've seen. I at last wish to see for myself. What will become of this city?"

Setsura stood there in front of the door. He didn't answer. Or perhaps it was the darkness itself that held its tongue.

"This city has belonged to the likes of *you* all along. Fifteen years and we've only just remembered. He's a tough nut, tougher than *his* father, tougher than *yours*. Are you tougher than your father?"

"He had minions. Have they returned too?"

"Hyota? He didn't show his face. But he has means and skills of his own. Ah, parting is such sweet sorrow."

"How did they convince you?"

"Promise me—to send Shiragi and Kurusu on to their just rewards—I couldn't do it alone, but with you—"

Mitakara's head popped off his shoulders like a manhandled old doll coming apart. The blood fountained from his severed neck. The body ballooned to twice its normal size.

Setsura leapt backwards, to the door, opened it and slammed it shut while still in midair. The door mostly contained the explosion that followed. The four-inch thick oak bowed outwards and split apart under the pressure, the cracked wood stained red.

He landed in a corner of the hallway. Carried along by the shock wave, the flames and shards of wood rained down on him. If those shards possessed a sentience of their own, they would certainly have expressed their surprise at what their target did next.

Maintaining a perfect balance, Setsura jumped back again without bending his knees. The walls of the director's office crumbled like an

earthen levy assaulted by a flood, spitting out fire and a blast of superheated air. The flames washed down what was left of the hallway and raced after Setsura.

He didn't land but glided three feet above the floor. The black slicker kicked up around his waist streamed out behind him as the jump turned to flight. The eyes watching the fire pursuing him were dark and clear.

The stairs came up before him. Fire consumed the floor in front of him. A hellish inferno blocked the way back.

Setsura's right arm, hanging by his side, jerked up. Rebounding like a spring, he abruptly changed directions toward the line of windows on his right. Bulletproof glass and hardened steel shutters covered the windows.

His left hand moved within the rushing wind. The black night outside peeked in. Setsura Aki twisted his body and sailed head-first through a gap where the glass and shutters had been. The claw of fire reaching out to him missed by a hair's breadth, raking only the empty sky.

Mitakara had literally bet his death to lay the trap, ingesting a radioactive catalyst that turned his body into a furnace. Setsura Aki slipped out of the snare and escaped into the night.

Who was this Gento Roran who rose to challenge him? Somewhere out in the night, as if answering that question, a dog howled.

Part Three: Assassin Reincarnation

Chapter One

Streets blessed with such a rich variety of pedestrian traffic could be found nowhere else.

Salarymen wearing three-piece suits and neckties; young men and women in the ever traditional T-shirts and jeans; girls thronging the information booths on the street corners, 3D video cameras hanging around their necks—probably sightseers from outside the ward.

Men dressed in long reddish-brown robes, razor marks still fresh on their bald heads, evangelists for one of Shinjuku's hundreds of pagan sects. Maintaining a safe distance behind them, a heavy-set man in his fifties wearing a rumpled suit, not a speck of emotion in his eyes—undoubtedly a hit man hired by a rival sect.

A discerning eye could read the occupations of the other passersby: a yakuza capo wearing a brightly-colored suit and necktie and sunglasses, his underlings in gaudy aloha shirts; an illegal cyborg, its special alloy head and arms glinting in the sunlight; outlaw espers, hard to tell apart at a glance; the usual underworld muscle.

In the recessed plaza of a building, a perfumer randomly called out to the tourists, trying to lure them over to his “instant illusion” booth, promising to deliver the real experience of two hours of the hottest sex with an ideal lover in thirty seconds flat.

The rumors said that since going on sale, the number of dead and disabled customers had already reached double-digits.

A man wearing a fedora stood on the corner in front of the shuttered Mitsukoshi building. His coat was inappropriate to the season, unusually large and bulky due to the handguns and assault rifles and grenades and incendiaries hanging all over it—the kind of street vendor you could only find in Shinjuku.

Currently for sale was the latest caseless type 3 mm Colt M77, three fifty-round magazines included, for nine-hundred thousand yen. An old-school Colt Government .45 and a 9 mm Smith & Wesson M 659 went for fifty grand apiece.

The recent bestseller was the Steyr AUG assault rifle, thanks to the Austrian Army converting to Heckler & Koch caseless ammunition and dumping their used inventory on the market.

Tobacconists selling a compound of drugs illegal outside the ward called “Shinjuku weed”; “instant steroids” guaranteed to have no side-

effects, for protection against the violence that could crop up in an instant; S&M parlors that invited passersby to beat on the patrons (anywhere but the head) with a hammer; the usual high street shops.

It hardly stopped there. Opium smugglers schlepping their wares around in metal lockers; a human reconstruction physician, a doctor's bag in one hand, hurrying to a house call; diviners of ill fortune who only dealt in bad outcomes; students of the local school of fraud and grifting, all smiles no matter how unfriendly the crowd; the homeless and vagrants, their bodies festering under the effects of unknown narcotics.

The sightseers aside, people strolled by without the slightest alarm. The uniformed commando police now and then appearing among the crowds showed no inclination to arrest any of them. Their job was to keep Shinjuku's streets safe for the tourists.

Every last one of them emanated an evil and foul odor that even in the middle of the day mingled with the rich and bewitching miasmas, filling the streets with an indescribable aura.

In the midst of all this—any “normal” person suddenly introduced into this environment could expect to get seized by the chills and feel nauseous enough to vomit on the spot—ordinary tourists happily plodded along. The reason must be that they'd been contaminated the minute they stepped foot in Shinjuku's precincts.

Chaste and well-bred daughters were known to open their legs to any man at the drop of a hat after spending three days there. Out of every hundred perpetrators of domestic homicide nationwide, at least one had instigated the violence immediately after returning from the city.

Shinjuku Avenue, with the Isetan and Mitsukoshi department stores hugging the sidewalks on both sides, was the city's safest boulevard. Fifty thousand people tread its pavement every day, and on average, only one murder was recorded there every three hours.

People flowed along the roads from there toward Kabuki-cho, Ichigaya, Shinjuku Gardens, roads leading them all down to hell. Of course they did. Because this was Demon City.

Among those fifty thousand, Banri Sasaki was a man with a mission, if one eccentric even for this population. In order to accomplish it, he had a HD camera and high-gain mike sewn into the collar of his shabby coat and belt buckle.

Compared to that, the Smith & Wesson .38 Military & Police six-round revolver in the holster on his right hip was nothing more than a sidearm.

Sasaki was about to cross the street from Mitsubishi Bank headed in the direction of Yotsuya, the Isetan department store on his left, cracks crisscrossing its once-majestic walls.

Just as the light turned green, he turned around, as if a contrary thought had suddenly occurred to him, and hailed a taxi waiting there

at the crosswalk. It was an old-fashioned gasoline vehicle. Gas turbines were all the rage now. Here in Shinjuku, though, old technology still had its uses. To start with, late-model gas turbines were few in number and a prime target for thieves.

“Where to?” asked the driver.

He looked less like a cabbie and more like a carjacker, though that was more the product of his environment. The question was relayed via a speaker embedded in the bulletproof glass panel separating the front and back seats.

“Shinjuku police station.”

“You a cop?” the cabbie said with a grimace.

It was a rule of thumb that nobody drove a taxi in Shinjuku that didn’t have something to hide, and didn’t have a good reason to watch his back. Not only the bulletproof glass, but beneath the rear seats was a tank of gas. Tear gas, usually, but just as easily exchanged for sleeping gas or worse. And yet not one case of murder had ever been recorded. It was against the cabbie code.

“Something like that.”

Sasaki leaned back against the seat. Page one of every Shinjuku guide book warned tourists in bold print not to reveal they were from outside the ward. In order to deal with the number and variety of crimes in the city, the police deployed human doubles with implanted memories that veteran criminals had a hard time telling from real residents of Shinjuku.

The taxi descended Meiji Avenue and turned left onto Yasukuni Avenue. The look of the city suddenly changed. The blocks leveled during the Devil Quake back in the 1980s had since gone through cycles of rebuilding and setbacks while the real estate brokers played a game of musical chairs. The look of the city here bore no resemblance to what had been there before the tragedy.

From the intersection with Meiji Avenue to where it collided with the elevated Yamanote line, the street lined with such grand structures as the Isetan Shinjuku Annex, Isetan Hall, Shinjuku Shochiku, and Shinjuku Ad Hoc was jammed with long and narrow three-story buildings, crowded with shops stocked with questionable and hazardous wares. Nothing to match the grandeur of Shinjuku Avenue.

The high-volume arms dealers were wont to frequent the weekly Hanazono Shrine discount bazaar. The storefronts were packed with the grotesque and magical goods peculiar to Demon City.

Body snatching parasites with five times the efficacy of potency of human personality modification drugs. Resembling sea cucumbers or jellyfish daubed with nauseating hues, the created personality profiles lodged in their cells got injected into the brains of the hosts, turning a demure young lady into a professional sneak thief, or a scrawny teenager into a hardened street tough that’d put a mobster to shame.

They also sold souvenirs more to the liking of the sightseers. But most of those were available at the customs stations adjacent to the three gates that connected Shinjuku and the outside world. Items successfully smuggled through raised such hell that the authorities exercised all due precautions.

The unfortunate effects of Demon City weren't limited to its citizens alone.

Take the pottery piled on tables in one of the shop fronts.

A crudely-shaped small black saucer, looking like it'd been fired by a rank amateur, went for a hundred thousand yen. A bit much, it might seem. But then, from that night hence, the purchaser would dream bad dreams, and forget all about them the next morning. By and by, they would sap his physical and mental strength, within a fortnight rendering him little more than a vegetable.

At that point, whoever discovered the saucer would find it stained blood red. Some unknown necromancer had literally baked the curse into the glaze of this "nightmare saucer." Needless to say, those harboring criminal intent would find reasons to give someone this gift.

Take the dazzling array of flowers.

A rare species that certainly did not exist in the outside world. Its uses were as varied as its strange effects. Set out on the roof on a night when a brisk wind blew, the flowers' petals unfurled in the glittering moonlight, scattering its scent on the wind. Then wait. Like moths drawn to the flame, men and women would clamber up to the room, hoping to seize a bouquet of those flowers swaying so gently in the breeze.

Hardly a concern, at least until they pitched from the building and toppled to the ground in perfect bliss. Heaven forefend that a ne're-dowell might plant them in some less godforsaken place.

Perfectly legitimate items were sold as well.

Leveled in the Devil Quake, the mayor had turned Kikuicho into farmland yielding produce rich in minerals and proteins. Exports brought two billion yen a year into the ward, though what sold at ten thousand yen a pound yielded barely one percent of that inside Shinjuku itself.

Recent publications filled the stacks in secondhand bookshops, more often than not in the form of crudely-bound machine-made copies. Information didn't care what medium it was printed on as long as it was there to be read.

Scholars with a keen knowledge of the handwriting of the great thinkers and scientists of the past would not believe their eyes, for there they would find preserved the soul and intellect of those great minds lost to history. These were the very writings those great men had once consigned to oblivion, and had gone to their graves assured that such accursed thoughts would never be read by future generations.

Books about sorcery and witchcraft; books about the *modus operandi* and true deeds of the criminal class; books spelling out their scorn and contempt for human intelligence and the future of the human species; books expressing skepticism about the fundamental basis of their own thoughts and philosophies.

Nobody ever knew from whence they sprang forth or into whose hands they fell, only that those who defined the world as it was presently known possessed minds given over to darkness.

But the sightseers who came to this city weren't known for their interest in research monographs and prophetic scribblings. A handbook revealing the true face of the world was available in three volumes, fifty yen each. They sat there gathering dust on a grimy store shelf in Shinjuku.

The taxi passed beneath an elevated train track and onto Oume Road and stopped.

"This is as far as I go," the cabbie said. "I'll round it down to the nearest ten-yen."

"You gotta be kidding me," Sasaki grumbled. "It's another quarter mile to the police station. I'll round it up to the nearest hundred, so keep going."

"Hey, don't give me no lip about it. You don't get out now, I'll round it up to whatever you've got on you. *Capisce?*" The cabbie reached for the control panel on the seat console.

"Yeah, I got it," Sasaki said, thumping his hands on his knees.

The air was hotter and more humid than downtown. The sultry air felt as if individual molecules of water were clinging to the skin and getting absorbed directly into the body. And in perverse exchange, the demonic miasmas welling up all around seemed to rob the soul of all ambition. Walking a dozen paces was enough to bring a strong man to his knees.

Sasaki raised his left hand to his eyes. The winding chain-link fence was over ten feet tall. Now and then blue-white sparks showered down. The five-hundred thousand volts of high-tension current had snatched a harmless gremlin out of the sky.

If a commando police patrol car hadn't passed by, Sasaki might have collapsed after another twenty yards or so.

"What the hell you doing something like that for?" one of the cops sighed. "We've warned people so many damned times about walking here from the station, you'd think they'd get the message. But there's still a couple every year."

His partner added, "The miasma from the park blows through here the strongest. Don't you listen to the news?"

Sasaki shook his head. The news updates at six in the morning, noon,

six at night, and midnight broadcast DMZ miasma density eco-zone warnings to the general public on the public television screens. Though lately they had become more part of a general safety policy directed at tourists and visitors. The previous February, the “Third Mopping-Up Operation” had yielded great results.

Sasaki was treated in the infirmary of the Shinjuku police station. After some bed rest, he started feeling mostly normal again. The diagnostic machine next to his bed analyzed the symptoms when he was brought in and dispensed the proper amount of medicine. Sasaki mulled over the three white pills and pocketed them.

There wasn't a doctor. He must be helping out at the affiliated hospital. Suspects were constantly being hauled down to the station. If they hadn't already gotten roughed up pretty severely for “resisting,” interrogation was bound to leave many of the rest of them half dead.

Sasaki discharged himself from the infirmary, found an elevator, and pushed the button for the third underground level. The cops had confirmed his ID in the patrol car. After explaining what he was doing in Shinjuku, he was given an all-access badge.

The third underground level was lined with steel doors. Interrogation rooms. All of the doors were bent and dented, the marks left by criminals freaking out inside. In this city, there was no underestimating the kind of damage a roid rage could inflict on two-inch hardened steel.

Sasaki knocked on the door marked with the number seven. The fingerprint lock clicked and the eight-inch steel door silently slid open. The windowless, steel-lined, battle-hardened ten foot square room was designed to contain the worst effects of a suicide bomber.

The wall on the right held an intercom and switch panel. Facing the entrance was a wooden table and two chairs. The lights recessed into the ceiling filled the dreary space with cool light. The fair features of the young man standing behind the table cast off a cold fire all their own.

Chapter Two

“Are—are you Setsura Aki?”

Sasaki’s voice rose half an octave. His blood pressure followed suit. *Keep your head in the game*, he remonstrated with himself.

This was probably the same young man who, on the corner in front of Mitsubishi Bank, had whispered in his ear that he could come to this room in the Shinjuku police station.

“I’m Sasaki, from *Historical World*. I apologize for taking you away from your regular business.”

He held out a business card. The young man took it, and motioned him to the remaining chair.

Sasaki had the uncomfortable sense of being under a microscope. Glancing at the young man’s face, he simply couldn’t get riled up about it. He knew he was staring at the smiling countenance beneath the wave of black hair, but had a hard time averting his eyes.

“I heard you ran into a bit of trouble getting here,” Setsura Aki said, the pleasant expression not fading from his face. “Get into the wrong taxi and you can end up in a world of hurt. In this city, you take your life in your hands just visiting the police station.”

“Don’t I know it,” Sasaki said. He restrained himself from adding a few choice words about that cabbie. The man had shown up to hear him out. The least he could do was buck it up.

“What little information I have says you’re a reporter for the *Historical World*,” Setsura said, glancing at the business card.

The statement was a tad anticlimactic. *Historical World* was a history periodical apparently as well-known inside Shinjuku as elsewhere. Nationwide, it had an audited circulation of five-hundred fifty thousand, leaving its competitors in the dust. That the subject of *history* could boast such a dependable audience spoke well of its enviable fan base.

“I’ll send you some back issues. But I am surprised.”

“What about?”

Eyes so deep they seemed portals to his very soul rested upon him. Sasaki shivered despite himself.

“The response to my letter said I was to take Shinjuku Avenue from the station straight towards Yotsuya. I didn’t imagine I’d end up meeting you in an interrogation room in the police station.”

“Did you say anything to the police?”

“Only that I was meeting you to get some material for a story.”

Setsura nodded, his eyes still fixed on Sasaki. “Fine with me. It’s as good an approach as any.”

“I wouldn’t have believed that’d ever pass muster. The biggest surprise of all. Walk into a police station in Demon City without any reason to be there, and walk out again with all your limbs intact. To tell the truth, this is exactly the kind of thing I’m looking to learn more about.”

He wasn’t kidding. The senses he’d honed during his twenty years in the business were kicking in. That sense of excitement, that flutter in the stomach—it was like watching the shell around the egg beginning to crack, the creature within poking out its beak, reaching out with its claws.



“As I explained in my letter, this is for our upcoming special edition issue. *Historical World* is taking a hard look at Demon City.”

Whatever reaction might have registered on the young man’s face,

the answer he gave was totally disarming. "From the day Shinjuku became Demon City up to now, every medium of mass communication on the planet has taken a hard look at Demon City. Every last one of them amounted to nothing more than vulgar sensationalism. Though I suppose as long as that meets the needs of the masses, this city will simply remain as one more source of sordid entertainment."

As a journalist, Sasaki wished to voice objections to this analysis. That human propensity to relegate objects of horror to a genre of entertainment must reach back into the mists of time.

Turning the horrors of Demon City into "special editions" and increasing circulation many fold wasn't done to panic the population, but because the readers really were fascinated by headline articles such as:

"Demon City's Tragic Year"

"True Crimes Attributable to Shinjuku's Devil Quake"

"The Witches and Warlocks of Shinjuku"

"Who's Behind Those Unsolved Murders"

"Shinjuku's DMZ: Then and Now"

As if responding to the need from outside the ward to produce greater and greater thrills, Shinjuku seemed to sink deeper and deeper into its accursed swamp.

Several years before, Shinjuku had seen an influx of forty-five thousand members of the criminal classes, approximately equal to the lives lost in the Devil Quake. That number had by now risen to at least sixty thousand.

Versus "regular" citizens sixty thousand strong. One out of every two was on the wrong side of the law somewhere. It was unlikely that such ratios could be found in any "uncivilized" city anywhere else in creation.

"Excuse me, but I'm not talking about the customary tabloid press treatment. We are going to address the meaning of Demon City in today's world. That means digging down through the historical strata and getting back to the beginnings, to the origins of everything that goes on here. I've taken personal responsibility and have gone to great lengths."

Sasaki awaited the young man's reaction. This little speech should have given him an edge. He knew he had that look in his eyes that dared anybody to think otherwise.

"Hmm," the young man said. "So, exactly how much do you know? Roran's name came up in your letter."

Sasaki felt a rising frustration, unable to infer anything from his tone of voice. It was like conversing with an animatronic doll that had

perfected human speech. He licked his lips. Wait for the other man to play his hand or show his cards? The room fell silent. The silence stretched out. Sasaki blinked first.

“I’ve researched the Devil Quake from every angle, the results of which leave me with one big question. Supposing we could assign to it something like *intention*, can what has sprung forth since be attributed to the person who triggered the Devil Quake, or attributed to the Devil Quake itself? A satisfactory answer has eluded all my investigations. How could that intention be described in the first place? This is where scholars are bound to focus their attention next.”

Sasaki worried he was laying it on a bit too thick. The young man listened attentively with no evident distaste. Or at least he appeared to be paying attention. Sasaki had no choice but to continue. At some point, the drive of a veteran reporter to seek out a response from the questioner had abruptly waned.

“This was the focus of my attention when I started collecting material. A magnitude 8.5 earthquake struck directly beneath the city. As if reading a map, the earthquake left the neighboring wards untouched. What could explain such a phenomenon?”

Sasaki took a breath and continued.

“How could forty-five thousand people die while at the same time and literally next door, not even a puppy was hurt? Then there were the repeated and unsettling setbacks in the reconstruction efforts. The killing sprees with automatic weapons. The transport that inexplicably went missing on its return route. The memorial service where the skin melted off the priest’s body. What is at the root of all this? There’s so much to investigate that I hardly knew where to begin. In fact, were it not for a rather trivial incident, I would have approached this special edition with a point of view hardly different from the rest, and equally far removed from the reality of the situation.”

He stopped talking. Not so much because he’d come to the conclusion of his thoughts. Something stirred on the young man’s face, as if to say: *Don’t tell me what I already know.*

Sasaki hadn’t gotten to the point, but Setsura Aki was doing a fast-forward. He asked in a perfectly polite tone of voice, “What was this rather trivial incident?”

Sasaki gulped a bit. His mouth was so dry there was nothing left to swallow. “That would be—” he began hoarsely. He paused and tried to summon up some saliva to wet his vocal cords. He hadn’t felt like this even interviewing one of Shinjuku’s deadliest assassins.

“A friend of mine is an internist,” he began again. “He showed me something very interesting, a microcellular scan he’d done on a cancer patient. The display showed the afflicted carcinoma and the surrounding organs. This was a patient on his death bed. The only question was how rapidly the cancer cells would invade the healthy tissue. He’d mapped

the whole thing using computer graphics. Not exactly my cup of tea, but he seemed to get a kick out of it.”

Sasaki permitted himself a small sigh. “So I ended up as the spectator for his show. The cancer cells were dyed black. They spread into the white normal cells. I sat there glued to my seat. You can probably guess where this is going. The map of those cells perfectly aligned with a map of Tokyo—I know, because I carry a map of Tokyo with me wherever I go. I pulled it out, and I swear it raised the hairs on the back of my neck.”

He wiped his brow. The ventilation left much to be desired. All the better to make the suspect literally sweat. The interrogators could take a drug to cool down their own body temperature during the questioning. But it wasn’t the warmth that was making Sasaki sweat. The fever was erupting from within. He felt he’d said too much already. He felt something approaching despair.

“That definitely is quite interesting.” Though his eyes said something else entirely. “Please continue. Let’s get to me and Roran.”

“Ah, first, I need some water.”

“Yeah, it is hot. But there’s no running water down here. Keep going, in as much detail as you can.”

“Just a minute—”

“Exactly how did you come to know about me and Roran?”

Sasaki stared back at him. It was like he was looking at a different person. “Who—who the hell are you?” Civility was hardly the issue now.

“How did you find out what you found out?”

“I’ve done some investigating of my own—witches and warlocks working in Shinjuku, new religious sects—and the connection between these supernatural phenomena and the Devil Quake is impossible to ignore. God, I need some water.”

“And the result of these investigations?”

“Nothing but dead ends there. I chanced across a more productive thread while looking into the early days of Demon City’s fratricidal conflicts.”

“Hoh.”

“I have connections at the National Library and the resource center at the Police Training Academy. I turned up a name, Onizuka. A police officer, nearing seventy. He was the only cop who survived Demon City’s first year.”

“That many died?” the young man said. He seemed surprised.

“In the three days after the Devil Quake, until the temporary bridges were erected, gangs ran rampant, violence and murder broke out everywhere, and the Shinjuku law enforcement infrastructure was in shambles. The cops who’d survived the Devil Quake were all pretty much killed in the line of duty.”

“Horrrifying.”

“And I’m sure you don’t need to be told the murder rate in the year following. The total came to 5,824. If my memory serves correctly, the number of homicides for the entirety of Japan during that period was 1,920. In other words, a single ward had three times as many killings as the rest of the country combined. Add in theft, burglary and assault and it comes to more than three-hundred thousand cases. That year, 2,819 police officers died in the line of duty. Only one lived to tell the tale.”

“And that would be Onizuka.”

“Yeah. He was discovered in a vacant lot near Kabuki-cho, alive but his memory gone. He spent the next fifteen years convalescing. I checked him out.”

Perhaps in order to put the officer’s mind at ease, Onizuka’s hospital room was filled with a wan, dusky light. This was the room he’d silently occupied for fifteen years. He opened his mouth for the first time.

Sasaki only had one question to ask him: “What did you see?”

He had no way of knowing that in doing so he was taking hold of the end of the strange thread that tied them together, himself, Setsura Aki and that letter he’d sent. He still believed Onizuka was mad. If by chance some spark of sanity had returned, the brain cells holding those memories from a decade and a half ago must have turned to dust in the meantime.

Contrary to expectations, the old cop, all white hair and mottled skin, looked at Sasaki, his eyes coming unmistakably alive. Sasaki had to wonder if he’d been feigning insanity all along.

Onizuka told the story in a voice that sounded like rust falling off an old lock. He’d been transferred to Shinjuku—where the criminal class ran amok—two months after the Devil Quake. Though police headquarters had covered up the true number of cop killings going on, news about Demon City filled the airwaves. An officer who found out he’d been transferred there either resigned on the spot or made out his last will and testament.

As fate would have it, Onizuka was assigned to a police station in Kabuki-cho.

The ragged walls and skeleton of the Koma Theater still remained, while the rest of the buildings and houses had been leveled. Not so different from anywhere else in Shinjuku, except that perhaps because of some lingering karma from its prior existence, the remains of this entertainment district that once fed on human wants and desires became a magnet for all the lower forms of life.

That may have also decided Onizuka’s fate after only two days at his new post.

He set off on a patrol late that night. At one end of “Water Fountain

Square” in Kabuki-cho, in the midst of the mountain of bricks and rubble where the Shinjuku Milano and Shinjuku Tokyu Theater once stood, he witnessed a fight.

It was a battle of two against one. The one was a man of medium build. The two consisted of a tall, lanky man and a quite shorter one. The battle resembled a dream beneath the beautiful moonlight, a scene that could surely be found nowhere else.

The Demon City police had been ordered to ignore any gang wars if civilians weren’t caught up in the fray and the combatants outnumbered them by more than three to one.

There were three of them and one of him. And even if the ratio was different, Onizuka would still have stood there rooted to the ground. The contest unfolding before his eyes did not resemble any kind of human combat.

The short man threw a right hook. His opponent ducked behind a slab of concrete. The concrete shattered into a thousand pieces. And didn’t make a sound. As if awed into silence by the scope of this struggle, even shattered concrete dared not break the mood.

The man with the medium build now waved his right hand, as if scattering the moonlight. The short man jumped into the air. A crisscross of slashes tore into the stone wall behind him.

Before the short man touched down, his attacker raced across the ground, like the wind. The silhouette of the lanky man appeared in front of him, sitting cross-legged. The running man’s right hand—that had somehow sliced through stone—flashed again. An invisible surge of energy assaulted the sitting man.

Onizuka could feel it ricocheting off of him.

The short man twisted his body in midair. The man with the medium build reached his left hand behind him. At a distance of ten feet, the invisible power blossomed again.

Windmilling his arms and legs, the fierce surge of energy shot the short man skyward and sent Onizuka crashing into the concrete wall behind him. His skull still ringing, he somehow managed to open his eyes.

The fight was now a duel—at least until the short man came back down to earth.

The sitting man was wearing what looked like a black kimono jacket. Both eyes were closed. The only thing distinct about him were the dark shadows traced by his sunken cheeks. His age was indecipherable.

His adversary was dressed in black as well. Aside from his age, nothing else about him could be discerned. The one thing they did have in common was a demonic aura welling up from their beings, as if about to burst out of their skins.

Despite being bathed in it, Onizuka kept himself conscious.

The hands of the standing man suddenly sprouted dozens of extra

appendages. It was an illusion, but that's what Onizuka saw. He moved his hands up and down at a blazing speed, pausing only a fraction of a second in each stroke.

Whatever he was up to, at some point he tightly closed his eyes. And then opened them wide. At the same time, his infinite number of hands faded into a blur and concentrated into a line extending horizontally from his shoulder.

"Got you, Kongojin Roran!"

Together with the cry, his sweeping left hand grabbed hold of something. The man sitting on the ground convulsed. With a shower of blood, his head dropped to the ground. The fountain of dark blood formed a dome above his head, as if sticking to the air, and then faded away.

The nightmare battle having come to its horrifying conclusion, the stabbing pain washed away by the terror of the moment, Onizuka got to his feet. Now his ears made out a low and bitter sound, a voice crawling across the ground toward him.

A small silhouette stood behind the man with the medium build. Not the short man from before—he'd disappeared into the surrounding darkness—for this was a child.

He was barely three feet tall, ready to enter kindergarten. But the voice—what Onizuka had taken for tears, when he listened more closely—was the sound of an adult.

"I saw you, Renjo Aki, I saw what you did and how. Don't count on it working a second time. Father, it was worth dying to show me that, wasn't it?"



That was when Onizuka realized—the child wasn't weeping. He was laughing. His words were suffused with joy. This young person was literally shaking with delight as he'd watched his father's head drop

from his shoulders.

“Decades hence, we will meet again. And when we do, remember tonight’s encounter, for therein shall be revealed the fate that awaits you or your son.”

The young one’s laughter, sounding at times like it was issuing from an old, rusty pipe, abruptly stopped.

“Gento Roran, I presume. So nice that you could drop by. I do not enjoy killing children, but the enmity between the Roran and Aki clans extends to even the bugs in our beds. *That* is the fate that awaits you.”

The man called Renjo Aki raised his hands and stopped. He stared at the gaunt, headless man he had so strangely killed. The torso was, from an utterly perverse perspective, doing what it should naturally do. It leaned forward, reached out, and picked up the head.

The man who had killed him stood there like a statue as the bloody corpse clambered to its feet. The air was thick with magical miasmas and the stench of blood.

In the crystal clear moonlight, the bad dream had taken a turn for the worse.

The arms cradling the head raised it up and placed it on the stump of the neck. Out of alignment at first, the head facing to the side. A quick adjustment brought it facing forward.

The head opened its eyes. A grave and gravelly voice said, “I, Gensei Roran, have spoken. When we meet again, the era will no longer be ours. I shall rest for a while. What shall become of this city? Renjo Aki, this is the time for you to start planning as well.”

The words had barely left his mouth when his body crumpled. In a flash, the bloody black smoke spread through the air and shrouded the dark silhouettes of the three other figures.

As Onizuka tried to keep his eyes open, exercising all of his remaining will, he heard what he took to be Renjo Aki’s voice.

“Sorry for wasting your time, Mr. Policeman.”

Then the headless Roran’s response. “He cannot be left to his own devices. It is not good for the hoi polloi to see their overlords fighting among themselves.”

“I—”

Onizuka feared the voice of that child more than all the rest. Renjo came to his rescue. “There is no need to take his life. I shall take his memories instead.”

“Can you, from this man?”

“Only the exchange of your life after this for being alive. Which would you prefer?”

Hardly a simple struggle between life and death, these mortal enemies not only wagered their souls, but freely dealt with the devil on matters that lay far beyond this realm.

On the verge of losing consciousness, Onizuka croaked out the

answer and then slumped to the ground.

Chapter Three

Sasaki concluded the account, his voice exhausted. The young man rested his elbow on the table and cupped his chin in the palm of his hand.

“Fascinating. A truly fascinating story. So for fifteen years, he committed himself voluntarily to a psychiatric facility and didn’t say a word. He shut his mouth and closed the door on his life. They tied up the loose ends in an altogether alarming manner. That was how you came across my name and Roran’s name. So, what do you think? Does that make you a lucky man, or the opposite?”

Though Setsura asked the question with an utterly pleasant smile, Sasaki felt a cold chill down his back.

“I can surmise the rest. The police officer knows nothing. The true heart of the matter yet eludes you. And so you turned to Setsura Aki.”

Sasaki cleared his throat and tried to clear his thoughts of the sheer surprise and that faint sense of terror. He had finally noticed that the young man in front of him was a different person entirely. That smile was the smile of an angel. An angel of death.

“Alas, having only just returned to this city after fifteen years, I’m still getting myself up to speed on the subject. This conversation has served as a tremendously useful reference. Greatly appreciated. That the price should come at the cost of a life is highly unfortunate, to be sure.”

These angelic assurances perversely set Sasaki’s mind at ease. Mopping his sweaty brow, he tasted a bit of the good old piss and vinegar that got him up in the morning. A faraway look came to his eyes.

“Returning here after fifteen years—the kid of six or seven Onizuka spoke of—I see—you aren’t Setsura Aki. You’re Gento Roran.”

The young man didn’t answer. That was the answer.

Sasaki felt the tension oozing out of his body. Not only his muscles, but his soul was growing numb. This was not the time or place to care about the reasons.

“Hey,” Sasaki said, making a show of backing down for the time being. “This tough guy business is all part of the act, okay?”

He understood this wasn’t going to end well. He’d begun to grasp what kind of a person he was dealing with. Which was to say that the dark depths of some people were well beyond human comprehension,

except that Gento Roran had no intention of helping him out.

He was the hoi polloi, the insects crushed beneath the feet of the overlords.

In that case, better to kill than be killed. Though he lived outside Shinjuku, Sasaki traveled regularly to Demon City to gather material. While associating with people who breathed in its vapors on a daily basis, their moral and ethical outlook had seeped into his own consciousness in ways he wasn't fully aware of.

"All I want is material for my articles. This feud between you and Setsura Aki is totally not my concern. I'm a neutral observer. I don't know what you've been doing or where you've been doing it for the last fifteen years, but I certainly wouldn't begrudge sharing what I know. Of course, in return, I would expect a helping hand in padding out my portfolio a bit."

Gento Roran didn't answer, only quietly looked back at Sasaki. Sasaki's face reflected in his eyes. Only the reflection. No sense of will or emotion shone in those eyes. The light in his eyes was more that of a camera lens.

"Or then again, maybe not."

Sasaki scratched his head with his left hand. His right dropped to his side. His left hand quickly moved to the horizontal. A loud *bang!* shook the air.

Gento's eyes moved slightly, a natural response. Sasaki's right hand moved too. The hem of his jacket kicked up. He was holding a Military & Police revolver. The 2.5 inch barrel was perfect for making a quick draw.

Raising the gun to a 45 degree angle, Sasaki felt a sense of calm well up in his chest. "You talk big, Gento Roran," he called out.

His finger resting on the trigger, a moment's intention away from firing, he aimed at the point between his collarbones. Double-action revolvers had a tendency to pull low. At this distance, if Gento stood up, he'd hit him in the stomach. Even hitting him in the heart or lungs wouldn't necessarily kill him on the spot, to say nothing of a shot that only grazed the ribs.

In order to momentarily distract an opponent in a high-risk situation, he had a small flash bang concealed in the left cuff of his trousers. It'd done its job this time too.

"Like I said, I don't have any desire to shoot you. I'm merely a reporter in search of a story. Give me an interview and everything ends nicely. I haven't met this Setsura Aki chap either. So, what do you say? Deal?"

This blend of coercion and conciliation was something Sasaki could rightly take pride in.

Gento didn't answer. His frame shook. Sasaki tightened his grip, then relaxed. Gento was only shrugging his shoulders. He was a handsome

enough man that everything he did had a kind of panache to it.

“What did you want to ask me about?”

Imparting additional weight to this discovery of his, Sasaki paused to take two dramatic breaths, then said, “The true nature of this city.”

He was answered only by silence.

“What about it?” he pressed, a touch of irritation in his voice.

Gento said, hardly more than a whisper, “I should be on my way. There is much more I have to learn before I can answer your question. For now, we should say our goodbyes and leave it at that.”

“Let’s stop screwing around, okay? I’ve got to strike while the iron is hot. Mine is not the kind of job that can wait another day. I don’t have any qualms about pulling the trigger. Perhaps if I presented your head on a platter, the Aki clan will make me a better offer. Tell me what I want to know.”

“A good idea,” said Gento, not hiding the mirth in his voice.

Sasaki felt a burning in his gut, an anger born of holding the clear advantage in the showdown but being dissed anyway. His emotions snapped like an over-tightened string. It wasn’t hard shooting a person. Even with Gento dead, there was still Setsura Aki to deal with. But he couldn’t be as big a pain in the ass as this guy.

The six reports echoed off the walls and ceiling. Sasaki grimaced at the painful shock to his ears. Without a second glance at the body lying beneath the haze of blue smoke, he turned toward the door. The interrogation rooms were soundproof, but there was no point in overstaying his welcome.

A cold sensation crawled across his skin. He stopped. He looked back. Gento’s smile drifted up behind the fog of gun smoke like a flower.

“Want to give it another shot?”

Gento thrust out his hand in front of Sasaki’s face. A hard, metallic sound came from the tabletop. Sasaki looked down as the spent bullets spilled from his hand. The deformed slugs suggested they had all struck home.

Gento opened his hand and showed his palm to Sasaki. It was covered with metal. The skin shone with a black luster. Based on how smoothly he unfurled his fingers, it must be a very flexible foil. The condition of the bullets was evidence of its hardness.

But that wasn’t what struck Sasaki dumb. *How had he snagged those bullets in midair?* Those lumps of lead traveled at up to two thousand feet a second.

“What are you doing?” Gento asked with a perfectly straight face. “If you have to be on your way, then you’d better be on your way. Before my mood changes for the worse.”

Sasaki began his retreat only several seconds after Gento made this pronouncement. He was in way over his head in the weirdness. All he wanted to do right then was get out of that police station. He couldn’t

help feeling a sense of brotherhood with this Aki fellow, whose face he wouldn't even recognize.

Even after leaving the room and heading to the elevators, he kept his eyes focused on that door, practically running down the hallway backwards.

Part Four: Doctor Mephisto

Chapter One

It was one of those dreary, two thousand yen a night rooms, in one of those cheap hotels that could be found just about anywhere in Shinjuku. Hardly ten feet by ten feet, equipped with a metal-frame bed, a metal desk and chair—old, used, secondhand and bargain basement.

The ceiling lamps provided sufficient illumination, though the sterile white light did nothing to dampen that bleak sense of a winter landscape.

The reason was obvious. The bare concrete walls had the effect of enervating the human mind as soon as anyone stepped into the room. An organic person would never truly feel at home among the inorganic.

Through a flimsy plywood door in one corner was a toilet and bath. Nothing else. A cold, hard space that suggested nothing of the “life force” engendered by all living things.

But there was something living there, a black silhouette lying on his back on the white mattress. It would be no exaggeration to describe his youthful features as sculpturesque, perhaps chiseled from pale marble by the hands of an accomplished artist.

Light shone off him, a brilliant kind of beauty, brighter than the light itself. But calling it the “light of life” suggested that, contrary to the average man on the street, this young man was a kind of antimatter formed from moonlight. He breathed in air and breathed out moon dust. The touch of his fingers surely left behind traces of frost.

Such was the unapproachable beauty found in too perfect a mien. And in the countenance of Setsura Aki.

A long black slicker covered his lanky frame. He didn’t remove it even in the room. Darker than the artificial night, his pale hands and face emerged from the sleeves and collar.

His raven eyes were open, looking at nothing, taking in the past and the future, sadness or joy, and reflected it all back in a cool light. Perhaps all creatures of Demon City looked at the world with eyes like these.

This was one of Setsura’s many safe houses scattered throughout Shinjuku. He’d instructed his secretary to take a breather outside the ward, shuttered the *senbei* shop and moved here—before his visit to the Sanbo Group.

Everything he needed was packed into the one suitcase beneath the

bed. He hadn't carried it here. It never left the place.

Something moved in the stagnant air, as if pushing aside the molecules of oxygen and nitrogen. Setsura's right hand.

A white sheet of paper slipped off the edge of the bed, glided across the floor, and approached a corner of the door.

A brief flash. The thin Japanese paper parted in two. Not torn. The one sheet became two, as if two pages stuck together had been peeled apart. They were about to hit the door and wall when—without the hint of a draft—they changed direction like willful animals and rose vertically up the surface of the walls.

Climbed halfway up when the forefinger on his right hand moved ever so slightly. One sheet of paper became four. And kept on going, reaching the ceiling and sliding along it.

Their movements only became disturbed when reaching the middle of the ceiling. The four sheets and the one trailing behind scattered in all four directions.

Setsura pursed his lips. The puff struck the four sheets. They became eight. And then the same wave of wind hit the newly formed four. As if each puff of air had a mind of its own, losing shape and form, the bits and pieces fluttered down.

Ignoring the snow of paper, the man in black sat up. He went to the door. He didn't reach for the knob. The key quietly turned in the lock. As if nudged by the breezes he'd aroused, the door swung open of its own accord.

The gloomy hallway revealed no sign of human life, all the doors shut tight, like he was the only occupant in the building.

A dozen minutes later, Setsura was wending his way through the crowds on Yasukuni Avenue. Past the Tokyo Daihanten Restaurant, Hanazono Shrine, and the Pension Fund Association Building and on through Ichigaya, eventually coming to the Outer Moat Road. The streets here showed the full effects of the Devil Quake, the rows of houses still dotted with mountains of rubble.

The buildings here just barely preserved the outlines of their previous selves. Patched up, or simply opened for business the way they were, or taken over by squatters and vagrants.

This sense of indifference after the Devil Quake, the investigating committees had all observed, was a particular characteristic of Shinjuku.

Although established in a social environment devoid of order, ethics and morality, this city had seen the typical human propensities toward discrimination and alienation fade in equal proportion.

After being dispatched to Shinjuku as the British head of the seventh U.N. survey committee, Professor Bernard Sanderink publicly stated the following, making no effort to mask the mixture of wonder and

confusion on his face.

Concerning our investigation of a ward in Japan's capital city, we wish to announce our conclusions, fully aware that they contradict those of the six previous official surveys. Namely, that in districts of Shinjuku Ward, known as Demon City, the ideal implementation of human association, sought after but rarely seen since the dawn of civilization, has been achieved.

What has surprised the survey committee in particular are the so-called "upper-class" housing estates in Kabuki-cho, Yotsuya Samoncho, and Shinjuku Nanachome. There we found residents and vagrants, or the unemployed, leading considerate and cooperative lives, coexisting without abuse of their basic civil rights and without recourse to condescension on the one hand, or servility on the other.

It should go without saying that "consideration" and "cooperation" and "charity" are the very foundations of human virtue. It is indeed sad to admit that these traits only persistently exist in certain species of animals.

However, relationships arising out of such elemental factors should not be attributed to the reinforcing mechanisms of the particular environment, or to expressions of pity and mercy. Rather, the people themselves consider it altogether natural that they should be bound together in such a manner, and this, our investigations have revealed, makes the facts of the matter all the more unexpected and impressive.

If nothing else, we wish the following to be taken away from our findings: while Shinjuku reveals to some an evil face as Demon City, at the same time, it shows to others the kind of goodness to which we should all aspire in the course of our daily lives.

Descending Meiji Avenue, Setsura turned onto a wooded alleyway just before Kuyakusho Street. The meandering path of cobblestones known as Four Seasons Lane continued on for a hundred more feet before intersecting with Golden Gai, and then a cross street connecting Kuyakusho Street and Meiji Avenue.

One of those little corners of Shinjuku well known to those tired of the ubiquitous concrete and the constant press of human flesh.

But at this moment, in response to the light tread of Setsura's feet, the cracks in the cobblestones seemed to widen a bit. Strange shadows—hard to say whether flora or fauna or a combination of both—peeked out, revealing the green dots of their eyes.

Eyes brimming with hunger and loathing. There wasn't a breeze, but the tree branches on the right and left abruptly swayed. The miasmas

they breathed out swirled around Setsura and tightened into a whirlpool.

Black dots covered his face. Without so much as a twitch of an eyebrow, they dropped to his feet. Setsura calmly continued on his way like one of the young people who had once come here seeking a cool stroll in the shade, before the lane had turned into a nest of tiny demons.

Something crunched beneath his feet. A human femur. Looking more closely, skulls and ribs lay scattered around the roots of the trees. They weren't left over from the Devil Quake. The scraps of tattered clothing were too new. These were the remains of unwary tourists or drunks who'd stumbled into this little corner of hell.

"Four Seasons Lane" had since become known as "Man-Eater Alley."

Something that wasn't a snake and wasn't a tentacle crawled out of a hollow eye socket. An ordinary branch, it appeared at first look. But in fact, a trap to lure in the unsuspecting and set the minds of the unwary at ease. In the shadows cast by the rustling canopy, the undulating legs of a giant spider, a throbbing blob resembling a living liver and entrails, and other creatures crawled down the trunks of the trees and inched toward him.

The dense and sickly fog roiled up around him. Setsura walked right through it. With every step he took, the gremlins sprang up and flew at him. Then twisting their bodies and baring their fangs, they shrieked and screamed and retreated.

Ah, Setsura Aki, that beautiful genie. He stopped in the middle of the path, standing stock still as if finally affected by the poisonous vapors. Other presences shifted behind him, also sporting human forms. Two of them.

Both were a good six feet tall. One had unusually broad shoulders. Standing next to each other, the two of them blocked the narrow lane, their overlapping shadows seeming to weigh down the foliage to their right and left.

The circumstances soon became clear. The faint light falling on the man with the broad shoulders reflected off him with a hard glint. His body was covered with a skin of metal armor.

The protuberances on his shoulders indicated a miniature nuclear generator and power regulator. The electrical nerve fibers encased in reinforced plastic and hardened ceramic sheathing supplied an uninterrupted source of energy to his helmet-shaped head and the forward-jutting eyes.

The FS-9000-G polar combat suit was a ten-year-old design, though one advanced enough to still be employed by the American Air Force and NATO. With a power loading of fifteen hundred watts per pound, one pinky could gouge a hole in a concrete wall, and at full throttle, take down a small building in two minutes. With its large-capacity

transformers, an electrical discharge tube turned it into a one-ton murder machine.

The lucky shopper could find them at the military surplus shops outside Okubo Station, starting at a hundred million yen each.

Fingers like small warheads with polycarbide joints gripped the trigger of the PP-702 Glisenti assault shotgun he was cradling.

The other man was wearing a grey-on-white pinstripe suit. But from the green light glowing in his electric eyes, he was a cyborg. And was unarmed. These were the kind of living things that ventured into Man-Eater Alley.

"You're late and it's getting late. Wearing all that bling slow you down?"

It was clear from the tone of Setsura's voice that he knew they'd been tailing him, and yet he hadn't once glanced back over his shoulder.

"Huh," the expression on the cyborg's face said. He was a pro, used to dealing with every kind of unexpected situation.

"When did you figure it out?" said the man in the combat suit. Speaking via a mike and amplifier, he sounded like a heavy in a radio drama.

"Since I first picked you out of the crowd."

"Ah, so it was your intention all along for us to find you here. The shadow becomes the shadowed. Good show."

"Enough of the chit-chat. Seeing as you picked a strange place like this, you must be doing some weird weed. Anyhow, best you just give it up. No way you're gonna win. You're gonna end up worm food for these monsters here."

The cyborg's right foot traced an arc in the air. The sound of something soft being crushed beneath his shoe.

Setsura shrugged. "Trying to scare me to death, Sagara-san?" For the first time, a flicker of surprise showed in the cyborg's mask-like face. "Hey, it's no big deal. My secretary has a very capable information broker on speed dial." Setsura said, as calmly as ever, "In any case, as I'm sure you know, the Sanbo Group is no more. Why waste all the effort trying to kill me? *You* ought to be the ones forking out the protection money. While you are still talking to *me*."



The cyborg raised his right hand to his mouth and smirked. "You're a real comedian. I see. Like the boss said, you've got a pair of brass ones, I'll grant you that. But I don't see the need to hide in the shadows and

take shots at you with a laser rifle or RPG from a distance. Hey—”

He wasn't calling out to Setsura, but to the man in the combat suit next to him. He yanked back the pump on the gun, producing the distinguishing *click* of chambering a live round.

A switch next to the pistol grip of the PP-702 could be toggled between auto and manual fire. But the sound alone of the pump handle being yanked back could be expected to arouse the most fear in a victim.

Even today, cops in Los Angeles and New York preferred single pump riot shotguns with a manual option. There was nothing to match the effect on the criminal class of that pump handle being drawn back. They knew well enough the suppressing fire of a shotgun, turning a single shot into a blizzard of flying buckshot.

“What do you say?” the cyborg asked. “Makes a man think twice, eh? This baby holds double-aught. That's nine pachinko-sized balls inside each shell. Now consider every one of them perforating your body. That's a lot of red-hot hurt in a small package. All that smoldering lead spinning around in there like a washing machine, it'll turn your insides to confetti. The last kid who saw what we had to offer clung to my feet begging for mercy. Told 'em to suck it off, and the brat goes at it like a puppy.”

The twisted grin on his face suddenly vanished. A sense of unease cloaked the cyborg like a cold, wet blanket.

The man in front of him, about to become another one of his victims, was the same as before. Except that whatever made him *him* had changed.

The cyborg experienced what felt like tendrils reaching across the back of his neck. “Boy or a girl?” he heard the young man asking. The same voice from before. Or another voice entirely.

“Girl,” he answered, though not of his own free will. As if it'd been coaxed out of him.

“And what happened to her?”

“Fucked her brains out!” shouted the man in the combat suit, the muzzle of the shotgun shaking violently. “Back and front, both sides at the same time, a big serving of extra-large. Ever done a kid before? Man, they're so soft inside. Sound just like squealing little puppies too. All the blood just adds to the fun—”

“And now consider that you have met *me*.”

His low voice seemed to condense into a shaft of ice that pierced the pair of merciless murderers through their chests. The gremlins forming a ring on the ground around him scattered in an instant. They surely felt that *something* in the air.

The swirling miasma roared, but not at Setsura. The man in the combat suit shouted something, an angry bellow to shake off the entwining spell. The gun spat a tongue of fire into the air.

An arm that could bring down a building raised the shotgun to the vertical, tunneling nine holes through the thick haze. The cyborg knew the arm hadn't been wrenched up by outside forces. Rather, a stab of pain had assailed the flesh and bone encased inside the supposedly protective armor.

"You should follow the director of the Sanbo Group," Setsura said.

The pain vanished in that instant. The huge mass of the combat suit charged through the poisonous fog at Setsura. A wave of air beat against his back as his black outlines became a blur. The noxious vapors trailing about him, he leapt into the air.

"You screwed up, kid!"

The voice came from above him. To a man in a combat suit, equipped with inertia controller and recoil-less jumping ability, that vaulting black orchid that was Setsura was heaven-sent folly.

Channeling the momentum of the mad rush in a split-second, the one-ton combat suit climbed ten feet into the air, right above Setsura. The right hand holding the shotgun raised high as if in victory, only moments from turning Setsura's head into so much cottage cheese.

The cyborg observed from the ground, grinding up a foot-long green caterpillar with his right hand like an overripe banana.

The barrel of the shotgun swung down, grazed Setsura's head, pointing its black, cyclops eye at the cyborg. But the cyborg only wryly grinned. An expression that immediately vanished in a startled blast of sound. The clump of nine lead shots streaked down at 2,000 feet a second and struck him in the chest.

He reeled backwards as a second and then third volley followed, shredding his suit and sending the pieces of fabric flying. "What the hell's wrong with you, Sagara?" the cyborg screamed.

The man in the combat suit fell past Setsura and landed on the ground with a crash. "Hey, no way, man!" he frantically explained. "It wasn't me! My hands did it all by themselves!"

"Naughty hands." The cool, low voice of that young man interrupted the loud reverberations. "What do you say we tidy things up here?"

The question faded into the falling gloom filling the lane. What appeared at first to be long white radishes rained out of the sky onto the cobblestones. As soon as he realized what it was, the cyborg set off running. He was headed to the entrance to the lane when he divided in two just above his waist.

Blue sparks flew, a blood-like oil spewed. The lower half of his body, trousers and shoes and all, kept on going, galloping onto Yasukuni Avenue and sending pedestrians scattering out of the way before collapsing in the middle of the roadway. This was strange enough even for residents of Demon City that they all gave this most unusual of pedestrians a wide berth.

The tourists and sightseers, on the other hand, growing impatient for

something “interesting” to happen, immediately started shooting away with their camcorders.

The man in the combat suit landed on the ground and doubled over. He tried to raise the shotgun but finally realized that his right arm was missing along with the weapon.

The outer shell of duranium steel—that could withstand a direct hit from an anti-tank bazooka—had been lopped off from his shoulder on down. He slumped to his knees. Not so much because of the pain or the loss of blood, but because of those toxic vapors stealing through the severed opening in the armor.

Through the pores of his skin, down to the space between the cells, the miasmas invaded his body like water filtering through a sieve under osmotic pressure, and coursed into his circulation system. The wellspring of his being was torn out at the roots. A feeling of despondency surged through him. This accomplished killer was already well on his way to hell.

The treetops swayed. Sea slug-like creatures slurped their way into the gaping wound. However crazed he might be by the terrible realization of his now inevitable fate, the assassin couldn't move.

The bloodsucking leeches that had fruitlessly attacked Setsura's face had found fresh blood and an unresisting victim and swarmed over the wound, slowly devouring the flesh with their little mouths and sharp, tiny fangs.

Chapter Two

Exiting the lane as if nothing was amiss, Setsura came to a halt at a small intersection. The road on his left led to Kuyakusho Street. Behind him waited Man-Eater Alley, mouth open wide.

Setsura turned right and kept on going. Beyond a steel-frame arch, multicolored two-story buildings lined the sidewalks. The compact construction and the signboards hanging from the eaves identified these houses as part of the red light district.

Its *nom de plume* as Demon City notwithstanding, Shinjuku still mostly famously attached its name to the clubs and bars of Golden Gai.

Exercising eminent domain, the land acquisitions accompanying the relocation of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex had left Golden Gai in a precarious state. That it survived and continued to thrive today was a testament to the famous and the nameless who loved the place, and to the shops, and the people who ran them.

But most of all, it was a testament to the perverse blessings of the Devil Quake itself. Holding out longer than anyone expected against the mighty power of the national government, the last group of stubborn owners had exhausted their appeals. Their backs against the wall, they were putting pen to paper to sign over the deeds to the property—right when the earth shook.

The approximately three hundred bars—crowding the quarter-acre plot of land bordered by the five back alleys between Kuyakusho Avenue and Hanazono Shrine—were released from the pressures of the oppressive state and granted a new lease on life.

Its resurrected image was altogether different from the old. A sense of affection unique to this city sprang into existence between the patrons and the owners. The atmosphere on these streets was tinged with a sardonic wit and its own undeniable stench. Here and there between the gaudily accoutered shops remained the skeletons of those establishments that hadn't come back to life, like missing teeth in a broad smile.

The stories whispered there said that beneath the ruins lingered the unrecovered bodies still dreaming of the morning sun.

Setsura turned one corner after the other, navigating the narrow streets with the gait of one well-accustomed to the place. He stopped in front of a block decorated with garish signs and crowded with shops. It was twenty or thirty more feet to the back alley of Hanazono Shrine. To

his left, facing the street, were the ruins of two buildings.

"I bet those two would be pissed off if they knew why all three of you weren't there to meet me."

He seemed to be talking to empty air. There was no sight nor sound of anybody around him. Only the noonday sun pushing the shadows deeper beneath the eaves.

"You must be getting tired of playing hide and seek. Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Setsura fell silent. A gust of wind came at him from the right. Torn apart, the invisible streams divided high and low, ruffling his hair and coat before fading away.

A human figure suddenly appeared in the center of the rent air, standing there as if he'd condensed out of nothing. Only Setsura would have noticed that he'd jumped down from the roof of the bar behind him.

Not a big man. He was bent over from the waist up, almost parallel to the ground. His unkempt hair was tied behind his head with a strip of black cloth. He had on a black cotton shirt and trousers and a thick waistcoat made from animal skins.

His round face engendered not the slightest vibe of good cheer that might otherwise be expected. Rather, the light in his eyes suggested that the softest touch would split the skin like a knife. He was the predator that crouched in the shadows waiting for his prey to walk by.

This was not so much a man that resembled a beast as a beast taking on the shape of a man, the kind that haunted the moonless nights of bad dreams.

Setsura wasn't looking at the man's face. He was examining the man's back. It rose up like a small mountain. A humpback, a protuberance, lifted up the back of his shirt and waistcoat a good foot.

"Long time, no see, Hyota." A small smile rose to Setsura's lips, hardly befitting such a genie. "It's been fifteen years. We've both aged a bit in the meantime."

The man didn't answer. His forehead shone with a black luster like patent leather. Beads of sweat glistened on the skin. Cold sweat.

As Setsura had said, he was tired of playing hide and go seek.

The sweat shimmered, gathered into a drop and coursed down his cheek. The lips moved. "You're one scary bastard. The prey becomes the predator in the snap of a finger. Those two never saw it coming. Considering the heat they were packing, hard to believe they'd ever lose."

"I can't be so sure when it comes to your abilities," Setsura softly answered. "Fifteen years ago we weren't given the opportunity to test ourselves. But now? How about it?"

"Well," said Hyota, cocking his head to the side. The beads of sweat seemed to silently suck back into the pores. "Fifteen years ago I was

honing my skills as well. Shall we have at it for a round or two?"

"First, where's *he* been all this time?"

Hyota did not smile at the odd question. "We're all laying our cards on the table together. After all, this contest has gone on for fifteen years already."

"Where has he *been*? Or where is he now?"

Hyota raised his right hand. Setsura stepped forward. Hyota backed away. He didn't lower his right hand, retreating as if overwhelmed by some sort of primordial imbalance between them, until he'd run into the door of the bar behind him.

A thin line ran diagonally across the rectangular storefront. The entire top of the building started to slide down that line.

Whatever severed the ghostly wind must have sliced through the facade of this building at the same time. With a heavy rumbling sound, the tumbling structure shook the ground. By then Hyota had already jumped into the air.

Setsura's right hand moved. The air hummed. Hyota twisted his body. Glittering lines danced around him. Inside the layers of the narrow rings, Hyota spun like a top.

The rings tightened and contracted. Managing to slip through the mesh like a fish escaping through the holes in a net, Hyota sprang to a nearby roof and stood there like a stump.

"That's the game," he said, as if throwing in the towel, though there was no telling what this "defeat" was or how he had been defeated. The thin, glittering rings that threatened to enclose him had already vanished. Nothing connected them now but the thin air.

All the more improbably, he hadn't made a single offensive move in return.

"I haven't spent the last fifteen years twiddling my thumbs. And neither have you, I see."

"Where is he?" Setsura asked again. "Having shown you *me*, the least he could do is return the favor."

"You're not going to ask where the seal is?" Hyota said. "Gento-sama has already taken possession of it. You're late to the party, Aki-sama."

"I see," Setsura said, though his lips didn't actually move. Not a muscle in his body so much as twitched.

Hyota was the one who writhed. The sweat again coursed from his brow, streaking down his face with every tremble of his body, forming a damp spot beneath his feet. His face twisted with pain, so much so an objective observer might fear it would stick that way, like the pain was assailing him down to the marrow of his bones.

The faraway smell of alcohol wafted into the air, perhaps from a bottle of liquor severed along with the building.

"That being the case, you had no reason to show up. I don't imagine you wanted to drop by and say hello. Payback's a bitch, but there's no

knocking on heaven's door until you do."

"I don't imagine—Aki-sama—that you are the sort of man to let that slide—"

His reply could almost be taken for praise, though Hyota probably didn't see the slight smile that creased Setsura's lips.

A moment later the smile vanished. Hyota snaked out of his shackles like a contortionist defeating an invisible wire cage. He soared through the air, hugging the rooftops, with the speed and agility of a four-legged beast.

Scrambling toward the alleyway, his body once again stiffened. Hyota shook off the new constraints with his strange undulations. However disordered his appearance, he landed without a sound. His feet barely touched the ground before again propelling him forward at a sprint.

A mound of black debris filled the narrow lane. The debris was Hyota's clothing. The noonday sun glistened off his body, the tempered and striated muscles of his naked limbs exposed to the white light. Glowing beads formed a trail behind him, the sweat flung off his skin.

He ran as if being pursued by something close behind. His sweating face was etched with terror. A three-foot-high cinderblock wall rose up in front of him. The alley forked left and right. Hyota didn't slacken his speed. The ball of wind rammed into the prefab wall.

The structure of his body somehow allowing an exception to the physical laws of inertia, right behind the ball of wind came Hyota, making a sharp left turn without slowing in the slightest and barreling along, his fearful eyes glancing at the wall on his right.

There was nothing there. But his eyes alone saw something. An empty milk bottle was sitting on the wall. It blew backwards, scattering glittering shards across the surface. Hyota opened his eyes wider. Something else was there.

An animal sprang into the air, turned to the right and disappeared into a dead end. Ahead was a street leading to Kuyakusho Street. To the right and left were rows of houses and telephone poles.

Hope welled up on Hyota's face.

The top of a telephone pole traced a graceful arc, falling down as pretty as a picture. A foot above the ground, a smooth slit appeared in the concrete pillar. As if calculating Hyota's forward motion, it intersected his path precisely.

The shadow of the telephone pole eclipsed Hyota's head. He planted his hands on the pole and vaulted over it. And a moment later, scrambled beneath another, sweat flying like a wet dog, as the pole split in two beneath his feet.

The earth shook a second time. And died away. The two telephone poles lay across each other like a pair of logs. The alleyway too fell still.

Except for Hyota, lying there in a curious posture, in the gap between

the two poles. He wasn't hurt. And yet he wasn't breathing. His heart didn't beat. His metabolism had sunk below that which should otherwise support life. Even the circulation of his blood ceased.

The most sophisticated of the American military's life detection sensors would report his present condition as quite dead.

As if aroused by the impact, a great volume and number of strange creatures roiled up from shadowed side streets, from gaps in the rock walls. Octopus arms reached out from the extremities of amoeba-like forms, the ends forming into ruddy pincers, clambering over the poles and dropping to the ground.

Hyota's body was wrapped in a grotesque, squirming mass. Tentacles wrapped around his throat, suckers crowded with tiny teeth attached to his back. Viscous, translucent, throbbing lumps covered the half-domes of his pectoral and abdominal muscles. The pale threads of the feelers curled around his groin.

All the synonyms of "disgusting" could only begin to describe the eerie sense of revulsion the scene aroused.

Like their brethren in Man-Eater Alley, these voracious creatures had been born in the wreckage of a biotechnology lab in Ichigaya. Normally shunning the wind and sun, they were easily eradicated in the decontamination sweeps. But when they stumbled across an immobilized prey, their rapacious instincts came to the fore.

Living only to eat and shit and nothing else, their rudimentary sensory organs had registered a positive biological response a dozen seconds earlier. It died away before the heavy reverberations stopped shaking the earth. What brought them there in a rush was the memory of where that response had come from.

The presence of prey communicated by their avaricious tentacles and tongues was a big lump on the ground. They would crawl into his nose and burrow into his ass. Given the slightest scent of muscle, of moist flesh, and the tiny sharp teeth would chew through the skin, secreting acid that dissolved the fat and tissue and bones, reducing the largest man to compost in less than ten minutes.

But what these little beasts sensed now was no more organic than sand and stone. Their rudimentary synapses did not suggest that they test and see, for the results could be no different.

Even after the creatures had departed, Hyota didn't budge. A window opened above him. A middle-aged woman with a perm peered out, knit her brows, and spit. The saliva sprinkled down on his nose and head.

The lady closed the window. That a couple of telephone poles fell over and killed somebody was no reason to venture out of doors in this city.

During the day, when there was hardly a person to be found anywhere, this neighborhood was far more dangerous than at night, when pedestrians thronged the streets. The sightseers kept their distance

as well. If any had spotted Hyota, the guidebooks clearly warned tourists to steer clear of trouble, especially trouble involving dead bodies.

Setsura said, "You met *me* and then dropped out of sight."

He stood there on the strange battlefield like a statue, ears craned to the whistling wind. Only the fingers of his left hand moved, once, with a drawing-in motion.

"If *that* is his servant, I can only begin to imagine the master, and the danger that waits in the wings."

The wind carried his words away. In the midst of the white light, the beautiful shadow sculpted from frozen darkness strode towards a corner of Hanazono Shrine.

He'd made himself into a decoy in order to lure out a formless enemy. He'd gotten a tug on the line, but the main target hadn't showed, and then the one lead that could guide him back to the source slipped through his grasp. As bitter a conclusion to a battle as Setsura had experienced in a good long time.

He was back to where he'd started.

Chapter Three

The hot breath tickling her earlobes alone made her clench between her thighs. That was the last thing that should be happening. She'd heard the rumors, so before coming here, she'd loaded up on libido suppressants.

And yet lying on the bed and feeling a single breath—or rather, the instant she'd walked into the room and looked into those deep, dark eyes—the drugs might as well have been placebos. She was thereafter reduced to an obedient puppy, eager to fulfill his every wish.

The tingling desires welling up inside her, like being engulfed by an empty mist, she felt something akin to fear.

“What a vexing patient.”

The smell of him filling her nostrils—the entrancing voice humming in her ears—the words changing to hot mud in her brain—resonated like an aural aphrodisiac. The eighteen-year-old forgot herself and moaned.

“Why did you come here?”

Tightly shutting her eyes, lashes fluttering, resisting the impulse to blab, she said, “For—for a medical exam.”

“There is nothing wrong with you. If I had to identify a culprit, it would be these.”

Cold iron touched her breasts. And what magnificent breasts they were, retaining their natural perkiness even when lying down. The firm combination of muscle and fat and the taut flesh lacked the full luster of a mature woman, but possessed the wild beauty of youth in spades. Breasts that would bring any man to attention above and below.

Her pride and joy.

Men lined up to fondle them, suck on them, slather them with their kisses. She would take them in her arms and with a smile slit their throats.

These breasts were her weapons. And now against her will they trembled merely at the touch of those five fingers.

“Ahh—” She couldn't repress the moan that came to her lips. She raised her firm, tight thighs. The flesh glowed, the pale blue blood vessels snaking beneath the translucent skin.

A bewitching aroma arose from between those thighs. She was completely naked. He hadn't told her to disrobe. She had done so of her own volition, certain that the allure of her body would captivate him as

it had so many others. Her nipples grew erect, her hand slid down her body, perhaps even toward her damp bush.

“And who are you?” came the quiet question, not issuing from the vocal cords of any normal person. Not so much a pleasant voice, it arose from unfathomable depths, from an intelligent and cultured and refined disposition, containing a cold hint of steel. The listener could not imagine what kind of man this might be in truth.

Reaching inexorably toward the hot flesh between her legs, her pale hand stopped. Becoming aware of her restrained wrist, she squirmed again. Her voluptuous body undulated, now tinged with chagrin and humiliation.

“Who are you?” that voice asked again.

She answered with a gasp. “I am Ginko Asaka. They call me Miss Silver. The capo of Elegance.”

“A girl gang, eh? You worked for the Wickerman Group until they fell by the wayside not too long ago. Did you come here to revenge them?”

“Yeah. The capo you killed was my lover. Ah, shit. Let go of my hand.”

“I don’t think so,” came the answer, cold as ever. An icy finger brushed her nipple, eliciting from her a pinched cry. “A fool who pretends to be a patient and wastes a doctor’s valuable time I cannot treat so lightly. Shall we first explore those hellish depths of pleasure you so eagerly proffer?”

Even when he pulled his arctic hands away from her breast and wrist, the girl gangbanger could not move. Far from it, radiating outwards from that hand, from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes, the sensory currents vanquished from her mind any fate that awaited her hence.

“In this hospital, the hand is mightier than any surgical sword,” whispered the doctor. Standing next to Ginko, his voice tinged with haunting echoes, “A doctor investigates every connection between every gene and every acupuncture point. Your body shall learn the fruits of that research.”

The frigid finger penetrated the crucible between her legs. The woman arched her back. The translucent fluids welled up and spilled over. Pleasure and pain. There was no telling what would become of the human in the human being when those two things mingled and intersected and shot through the nerves with a hitherto unknown sharpness.

The pleasure could not mitigate the pain, nor the pain neutralize the pleasure. Both seared her from the inside out, stabbing down to the marrow of her bones.

Her finger trailed down to that point where they intersected and stroked with a feverish intensity. Her empty eyes filled with the light of madness. She panted, foam and spittle erupting from her mouth. Her

pink tongue slid across her lips, brushing it aside. Her hands danced in a masturbatory frenzy.

“You think maybe that’s enough?”

The unflappable voice blew like a clean, crisp wind through this obscene tableau. The doctor turned and looked back at the handsome figure standing next to the door.

Setsura Aki.

But however handsome he was, this doctor was another species entirely. He would best Setsura in a simple aesthetic competition. Setsura’s countenance had something of the ordinary human about it, while the doctor’s was the very picture of beauty.

The definitions of a handsome man, a beautiful woman, a sublime painting all differed according to the individual tastes of the observer. The audience applauding the next Miss Universe was unlikely to get similarly worked up about the Maitreya Bodhisattva on display in the Koryu-ji temple in Kyoto.

Even limiting the enquiries to the face alone could leave the judges worlds apart. This is all “worldly beauty.” By the standards of the human world, there is no “ultimate,” no final word.

But suppose these imperfect mortal standards were confronted by literally otherworldly beauty, a beauty outside of human experience—here was the physical manifestation of the same, the crystallization of pale perfection standing next to the writhing woman. Having touched her once, the effects did not cease when he removed his hands.

As further proof he was not of this world, stare at him intently and the vision blurred and the world around him grew misty, lost its shape and contours. The urban legends said that anyone who stared at him for a full minute could look at nothing else. His image was burned into the backs of their retinas. Nobody had stepped forward to say it wasn’t true.

“Better let her go, Mephisto. She’s going to damage something getting herself off like that.”

With a white hand Doctor Mephisto swept back the black forelocks falling across his forehead with a captivating smile. His hair spilled down his back like a sheet of black silk. “It is indeed unfortunate to find myself in the presence of your mundane self. When shall we meet that *other* you?”

In response to the yet somehow wistful question, that would melt the most beautiful woman in the world, Setsura only shrugged. “I thought you might want to hit a local tea house, but you look busy. I’ll settle for you serving me here.”

“Gladly.”

Mephisto’s faint red lips bent into a smile. He reached out to the examination table on his left, where the woman was still in the thrall of self-discovery. No sooner had the elegant fingertips slipped between her legs but the woman’s convulsions ceased.

As the tension unwound from her body, a somehow bawdy expression of bliss filled her features. Mephisto paid her no mind, waving his hand with the elegance of a symphony conductor.

Blue light flashed off his index finger. To Setsura's left at the back of the room, a nurse dressed in whites entered the room pushing a gurney.

"Give her a six-month memory eradication and discharge her. And don't admit her again. Oh, and get Aki-san here a coffee."

"Your most expensive."

"Our most expensive."

The outrageous directives notwithstanding, whatever he said was law. The nurse nodded wordlessly. She moved the gurney next to the bed, loaded on the woman, and exited through the same door as silently as she had arrived.

"Man, when it comes to women you're one cold bastard," Setsura said with a wry smile, shaking his head in disbelief. "And yet you surround yourself with legions of nurses. Kind of sets my hair on end at times. What are you thinking?"

"And if I said I was thinking of you?" He cast Setsura a sidelong glance that would reduce the most beautiful woman in the world to a mere country lass.

Setsura blanched a bit.

Mephisto added, as he returned to his desk in the corner of the room, "For one reason or another, this world must have creatures like women in it. Bodies and crazed countenances filled with corrupt flesh and unclean fluids. Why equip them with such grotesquely ample breasts and posteriors? The gods must have been drunk the day they created the female sex. I suppose they had to make do with what they had on hand, with no regard to common decency. A small consolation."

Setsura said dryly, "A small consolation as well that the same doctor who wiped out the Freaks with one hand, and with the other would diddle a woman to death, apparently knows what the word *decency* means. Well, there's nothing like throwing yourself into your work. Bitching and moaning about this vale of tears will get you nowhere."

Mephisto sighed, an altogether human affectation that Setsura knew no one else would ever hear.

"So, has *he* come back?" Mephisto unexpectedly asked.

"Whoa," said Setsura, patting his heart. "Gave me a start there. How'd you know?"

"This is Demon City."

"And you are the Demon Physician."

"As I am now," he said with a faint smile, turning to face the windows.

The windows covered the wall opposite. The examination room was flooded with light. It was a room with a view, though the view was not much to look at. The cracks crisscrossing the grounds of the hospital had

been sealed with concrete epoxy supplied by Yoneda Industrial. For over a decade now, the piles of rubble covering the adjacent lots had been taken over by a carpet of noxious dark green moss, punctuated by gaudy purple flowers and spotted stalks that peeked out from gaps in the debris.

The building that Mephisto and Setsura occupied had been spared damage, not because of superior earthquake-resistant construction or sheer luck. But as with the other few structures fortunate enough to have survived, because the Devil Quake “decided” not to.

At this time of day, the light streaming in from outside seem tinted with a thin film.

“Looks like rain,” the doctor said in a melancholy voice, though the kind of melancholy that made women—who knew nothing else about him—swoon.

“The rainy season, huh. I hate this time of year.” The man in the black slicker shrugged.

“I hardly think so,” said Mephisto. “Rain and gloom and neon go well together in this city.” He glanced back at Setsura. The braid of gold laying against his chest cast off a wavering light. His deep black eyes reflected the image of the young *senbei* shop owner. “We’ve known each other a long time, Aki-kun. So tell me, where did you come from? Where are you headed?”

“We’ve known each other a year,” Setsura answered in a wary voice. “But maybe a little coffee will loosen my tongue.”

“Just a second.”

From the door she’d just exited, the nurse entered carrying a tray bearing steaming mugs. With a glance at Setsura, she said, “Our very best coffee.”

“Blue Mountain blend?”

“That is correct.” She turned to Mephisto, “You have some unexpected guests.” She put down the tray and flicked her forefinger across her cheek, a gesture since ancient times used to indicate the presence of *yakuza*.

“Oh?”

Mephisto twisted the ring on his finger. A crisp projection of the hospital waiting room appeared on the wall in the corner of the room. It was clearly a blank wall. But the floor, the pillars holding up the ceiling, the couches and the people sitting on them had depth and dimension and a completely solid feel.

The high-resolution holographic image revealed the worried expressions on the faces of the patients and the hard, scowling countenances of the muscle-bound enforcers wearing garish aloha shirts and white kung-fu shirts standing guard at the foyer doors.

Setsura said, “They sure don’t look like patients.” *This* Setsura was the curious *senbei* shop owner. God was in his heaven and all was right

with the world. Whatever might be wrong with it only made it that much more interesting.

“Do they have an appointment?” Mephisto asked.

The nurse said, “A gang based in Hyaku’nincho, the Killer Light Society. It seems their repeated demands for operating fees and protection money have gone unanswered.”

“So they made you an offer you couldn’t refuse, eh? Oh, how scary.”

The same young man who’d just fought off three monsters while barely breaking a sweat—a genie who’d give one of those ancient Greek gods a run for his money—couldn’t resist a touch of portentous melodrama. Or comic relief.

“You’d better hurry up and put some clothes on that girl and hand her over. As a parting gift, I’ll throw in an Aki Senbei five-thousand yen sampler value pack.”

“Your *senbei* has been getting sweet of late,” Mephisto said with a dour smile. “The extra-thick variety in particular has not been up to snuff. You need to devote more time to your day job. Well, then.”

“Care if I ride shotgun?”

“Don’t do anything embarrassing in front of the patients. Unpleasantries are liable to break out in any case. Put operating theater number two on standby.”

The nurse bowed and left. Mephisto got to his feet. The sweep of his white cape stirred the golden chains around his neck.

The patients had crowded into a corner of the waiting room. They looked more tired than frightened, being plagued by internal diseases that were no less terrifying than these ruffians.

This being Demon City, that meant the face of one had half-turned into a gooey throbbing mass.

From between the bandages wrapped around the hands of another peeked out bristly appendages that could not possibly be human, probably a side effect from a low-grade shape-shifting drug.

A woman with what looked like vines or tentacles descending from her nose all the way to the floor.

The first impulse of those suffering from diseases rarely found anywhere outside this city was not to seek care at the National Hospital in Shin-Okubo, or the privately-funded Multidisciplinary Medical Center in West Shinjuku, but to put their fates in the hands of Doctor Mephisto.

The Demon Physician.

He glided through the waiting room towards the yakuza like a ghostly will-o’-the-wisp. Nobody knew the real name of the beautiful man in white. He’d appeared in Shinjuku fifteen years before and purchased this building—the former ward government building infested by gremlins and demonic spirits—and founded the hospital that bore his

name.

A flourishing success from the start, the facilities had been packed to capacity ever since.

But what really secured his reputation in the public imagination was successfully treating the mayor and prime minister after their helicopter made an emergency landing in the center of Shinjuku's Chuo Park during an aerial inspection tour.

They'd gone missing for two days in Demon City's DMZ, as Chuo Park was known, before being rescued by a suicide corps made up of three hundred SDF commandos and Shinjuku police and mercenaries supplied by private security firms. Only one hundred twenty-four made it back out alive, and half of those had already mutated into life forms barely recognizable as human.

When the most advanced surgical techniques outside the ward couldn't do anything for them, Mephisto restored them to normal in a week. In gratitude, the national and ward governments offered to issue him a special medical license, but he refused.

Not only medicine, but Doctor Mephisto was said to be equally versed in physics, metaphysics, electrical and chemical engineering, and theology. But he started his private practice with no more credentials than a lowly country doctor.

All wisdom and knowledge in the world alone were not likely to have much of an effect on the average gangbanger. Though as soon as they saw the doctor, easily mistaken for the ghost of some long-dead beauty risen from the grave, they all flushed in surprise.

They soon came to themselves. An even more menacing air filled the waiting room. The capo, identified by his pinstriped suit, walked up to Mephisto. They stopped and faced each other, six feet apart.

Part Five: Daughter of Darkness

Chapter One

The yakuza capo averted his eyes from the young doctor. Blood rushed to his cheeks. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

“What seems to be the problem?” Mephisto asked, his voice clear as a bell.

The yakuza hesitated, then found his voice. But there were limits to the power of beauty. The yakuza’s snake-like eyes prowled about the lobby.

“You’ve made quite the name for yourself around here,” he growled in tones that would make a normal man shake in his boots, as if he’d been tempering that instrument since the day he was born. “You must see a nice return on a place like this. Living the good life, eh? It’d be a shame if some punk monsters cut loose in her. It’d drain the kitty awful fast.”

He left the implications hanging in the air. Mephisto didn’t react in the slightest.

“But if we showed up at times like that, it’d set your mind at ease, you know? We may not look like it, but *integrity* is our watchword. Nobody works for us that we don’t already know. There’s even cops around moonlighting as common thieves.”

In fact, in the last two weeks, over a hundred cops had been caught taking shape-shifting drugs off the clock and looting local establishments. Anybody willing to put up with shoddy manufacturing and endure the numerous side-effects could shed every speck of the human and transform themselves into a beast.

The CSI units were designing detectors that could reproduce hard evidence from mutated fingerprints and fluids, but hadn’t yet produced a working model.

“You seem to be offering this hospital your security services. How much do you charge?”

The yakuza grinned at Mephisto’s question, not one to complain when the negotiations went this easy. “Well, there’s what you owe in arrears to start with. How about two hundred a month?”

The yakuza flashed toothy grins, like a pack of hungry wolves. The patients exchanged worried glances. Two hundred in ten-thousand yen bills came to two million yen.

“Agreed,” Mephisto said without hesitation. Perhaps the yakuza had

begun to take note of shadows lurking in his smile. "However, protection is one thing I do not need. There is something else I would like instead."

"Hoh. And that would be?"

Mephisto reached out with his left hand and traced a graceful circle in the air around the yakuza's brutalized nose. That gracefulness was perhaps why the man in the pinstriped suit didn't back away.

An audible *snap* as Mephisto flicked his forefinger at the man's nose. But even before they could start dreading the expected response, what happened next made both the patients and the yakuza gape.

Mephisto opened his hand. The yakuza didn't back away. His eyes opened wide in blank surprise. It shouldn't have taken more than a moment for true outrage at such an unexpected gesture of disrespect to reveal itself, but they opened wider still. Wider than was physically possible.

His eyes literally bugged out of his face. And plopped from their sockets onto the perfectly manicured palm, trailing the optic nerves behind them. He reared back and screamed. The kind of scream that made a brave man's hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

The yakuza looked across the waiting room from the palm of Mephisto's hand. A dark curtain fell across his field of vision as Mephisto yanked them out. A nurse was waiting there with a stainless steel tray, obviously prepared for what the hospital director was going to do.

Mephisto deposited the eyeballs on the tray. The look on his face might be mistaken for that of an angel of mercy. That expression did not change in the slightest when he turned to face the apoplectic gang members.

"Thank you," he said, and the words came straight from the heart. "But for two million yen, that isn't quite enough. Your internal organs, your skeleton, your brain—we are always a little short around here."

It took about two seconds for the rest of the gangsters to realize the horrifying implications of what he was saying. Any sensible man witnessing what had just happened would have pulled up stakes and hightailed it out of there. But yakuza weren't known for their reasonable sensibilities.

"Son of a bitch!" screamed one, slashing at Mephisto with a Japanese sword.

The sheer stupidity of such a move was made manifest a moment later. As he swung the sword with all his might, Mephisto lightly grasped the wrist with his left hand, and with the index finger of his right hand traced a line from his head down to his waist.

The line was stained red.

With a ghastly tearing sound, the line opened up to the left and right. Had the wound been made with the sharp edge of a blade, the skin

would have simply separated. This was no normal incision.



As the rest watched in stunned disbelief, the pink flesh peeled back like the skin of an orange and rolled up like a sardine can, exposing the

bones and organs of the yakuza's insides.

This appalling vivisection would have been amazing in a medical laboratory. But this was hardly the time or the place to do an autopsy. Whatever secret technique Mephisto had employed, all of the yakuza's internal organs remained in place and continued to function as a healthy body demanded they should. The dark red heart throbbed, sending the blood coursing through the arteries and veins.

Like the world's most realistic anatomical model.

"Hmm," Mephisto said, with a studious expression. "I see a touch of gastropstosis. Hold on for another ten minutes and we'll take you into the back and do something about it." Such dreadful words spoken in such a beautiful manner. "But it still doesn't add up to two million yen."

He stepped forward. The two yakuzas in front of him scowled and jumped back. Anywhere else even they would be beating a retreat by now. But this was Demon City. However horrifying the scene unfolding before them, nobody would be surprised at whatever happened next.

On one side of Mephisto, a man with a cyborg-like hydraulic piston poking out of his right arm roared like an animal and charged forward. Opposite him, another flashed a bare blade and set off at a sprint.

Caught between death by the sword or by the fist, Mephisto's cape danced. Flashing white and dark like a magical bird, it swooped between the naked steel and the clenched fists. The elegant gust of sweep of wind picked up the two gangsters and sent them crashing head-first into the concrete floor.

With a dull crack, their skulls gave way. Gray matter spouted from their ears and noses. Confronted with such a gruesome spectacle, nobody moved, nobody fainted.

"Other than chopping them up, I do not see much use for a yakuza's brain. What will you offer next? The patients and I are most grateful."

"Thank you!" Bolstering his pronouncement, the heartfelt voices of the patients rose up in the waiting room.

"I'll take a right hand!"

"An eye for me!"

"I need a pancreas!"

"Bone marrow for my child!"

"Please! You two!"

Pale fingers pointed at the two still-healthy yakuza. The raiders retreated. The patients advanced. Unable to withstand the surge of disconsolate emotions pressing on him from all sides, the gangster in the white kung-fu shirt yelled and yanked the machine pistol out of his waistband.

The hand holding the gun separated from his wrist, splattering blood into the air as it fell to the floor.

Standing next to the door to the examination rooms, Setsura stared at the ceiling with a look of feigned innocence, like a schoolboy who'd just

shot a spitball at the teacher.

The yakuza were beginning to grasp the terrible mistake they'd made. This was not a place where they came to take. This was a place where they came to get taken. This hospital was prepared to profit from them in ways they never imagined.

The people pressed around them like a small tidal wave. They froze in place. There was no escape.

The door flung open behind them. A completely different atmosphere filled the room. Following a phalanx of bodyguards in black suits, a fat man in his sixties pushed them aside and stopped in front of Mephisto.

"The Haniwa Syndicate boss!"

The exclamation didn't come from the doctor, but from the yakuza. In Shinjuku's organized crime hierarchy, the Killer Light Society answered to the Haniwa Syndicate and its godfather, Kakuzo Asaka.

The old lion roared, shaking his silver mane, "What, you punks can't tell the difference between doing the right thing wrong and doing the wrong thing right? You gonna put me and mine on the line next, huh?"

Casting the stunned yakuza a belittling look, he turned to Mephisto. This man, with five hundred heavily-armed men at his command, with a finger in every pie in East Shinjuku, a godfather wielding the power behind the throne at will—he went down on his knees right then and there and spoke like a dying patient on his deathbed, his voice crawling across the floor.

"Believe me when I say I knew nothing about this. They must have taken leave of their senses. As of today—as of this instant—their organization is dissolved. We will deal with them. Spare us, doctor! You too!" he shouted at his subordinates.

The men in black followed suit. The Killer Light Society yakuza were still standing there like fence poles.

"Idiots!" the godfather thundered. "This is all your fault!" He swept the protection racket thugs off their feet and pressed their faces against the cold stone floor.

"What—what are you doing? We were just making a deal with the doctor! Same as always!"

"Button it, you fools!" the godfather's consigliere hissed, his voice like that of a zombie. "Do you know who this doctor is? He took out the Freaks single-handed!"

The cries and complaints died in an instant. Everybody in Shinjuku knew what that meant. Immediately following the Devil Quake, gangs had multiplied like bacteria in a Petri dish. The most violent, the least merciful, and the most feared were the Freaks.

Fielding a hundred combat bikes equipped with missile launchers and multipurpose machine guns, the mayhem and slaughter that followed suggested no actual mercenary motives at all.

When they sent out a written challenge describing the course and day

and time of their wild rampage, the police could do nothing but evacuate the civilians from the path of destruction. The commando police had not yet come into existence.

The carnage ended one night in July after 247 deaths and over 370 million yen in damage. On a bright, moonlit night, a hundred bikers attacked the former ward government building. The law-abiding citizens of the city shut themselves inside their houses and shielded their eyes from yet another massacre.

And then the throaty roar of the engines ceased.

Cracking open the shutters and doors, they saw that the grounds of the white hospital were littered with crushed bikes and crushed bodies.

The irony of the scene escaped no one, the dealers of death dying in front of a hospital.

But the real story, whispered from mouth to ear, was that the picturesque director of the hospital had looked into the gun barrels of the hundred worst men in history and erased them all from Shinjuku in a single night.

A man who could vanquish them in an instant was said to possess telepathic or some other supernatural powers. But those rumors had not been confirmed in the fifteen years since.

Except the math didn't add up. Mephisto's fair countenance, rising like the moon over the quaking yakuza, overflowed with youth. The Demon Physician not only ruled over life and death, but time itself.

"In any case," he said, addressing himself to the godfather of the Haniwa Syndicate, "Supposing I do take the bodies of *them* as recompense, what then of the girl?"

"What?"

"The honey trap she laid in revenge for her boyfriend demonstrated a certain ingenuity and daring-do. But having come here to kill me, the matter cannot be resolved by simply handing her over. What do you propose?"

The godfather of the Haniwa Syndicate quavered and said, "D-Doctor, she is yours to do with as you please. I hereby sever any filial bond between us. Have her boiled alive or torn apart by wild dogs. But spare us and our organization."

"The next time you show up here, I pray it is as *patients*."

"Without a doubt. Without a doubt. We'll do the dissections ourselves and have the parts delivered."

Pinning the arms of the dazed protection racket thugs, the Haniwa Society godfather and his associates left.

"I am very sorry for all the commotion," Mephisto said to the patients in the waiting room, his face as calm as ever. "But as you have seen, we have a fresh supply of organs that should prove most useful in your treatments."

The patients all exchanged delighted looks. In this city, nobody

fretted about where an item came from and how it got there. They had families to support, and that'd be hard to do if they weren't alive.

Heading back to the examination rooms, Mephisto winked at Setsura. It was Setsura's devil wires that had severed the hand of the thug attempting to unleash a volley of 9mm rounds with his Uzi.

"Hey, I'll bring *senbei* next time I pop by. Thanks for the coffee."

"You're going?" said Mephisto, furrowing his brow. For a moment, the disappointed look on his face might well have been that of Juliet bidding farewell to Romeo from the balcony.

Ignoring it, Setsura started for the doors with a blithe wave.

Along the way, he passed a mother hauling along a girl of seventeen or eighteen into the hospital. She presented a card to the receptionist and was whisked away to the examination rooms, as if somebody was expecting her.

At his desk, Mephisto greeted them. The mother flushed a bit. The girl sat down behind her and didn't move. She was definitely conscious. The strong light of will and reason glowed in her eyes. Except that sitting across from Mephisto and evincing no physical or emotional reaction suggested something else entirely.

Whatever curse she bore—that could place such a compelling visage completely outside her consciousness—was locked up inside the heart of this girl with the big eyes and flowing long hair.

Her mother's audacious yet enchanting presence suggested a less than above-board occupation in the red light district. An equally strong sense of will emerged from beneath a light layer of makeup.

The touch of precocious sensuality about the girl obviously came from her mother. On the other hand, as she sat there wrapped in a red dress, her delicate frame and pensive air suited her age much better.

Dispel the anxieties that locked her into her prison of thought, release her to walk freely through the bright sunshine, and this was a girl who would attract looks from men and women alike.

"How is she, Doctor?" the mother pleaded. She was asking for the results of the previous examination.

Mephisto looked at the wall. The wall again changed into a screen. He studied the paragraphs of the German text and the columns of numbers for a minute. Facing the two women, he said, "Unfortunately, the underlying cause remains elusive. Genetic analysis and regression therapy have yielded no satisfactory answers."

The voice relaying this information—contrary to the hopes and expectations of the patient—contained not one sliver of hope or hint of empathetic emotion. A harsher assessment in front of the mother, to say nothing of the patient, would be hard to imagine.

The mother's shoulders slumped. The stored-up tension seemed to

evaporate from her voluptuous body. The back of the chair creaked.

“Well—then—I guess I’ll have to take her to a hospital outside—outside the ward. But—the university medical center where I took her previously—I have connections there, you know, they said that there was no doctor in the outside world as accomplished in this field as Doctor Mephisto. If you can’t cure her, then nobody can—”

“I will continue to treat her,” Mephisto said, as stone cold as before.

The mother looked up. “You mean, you mean there are other procedures you can try?”

“I haven’t exhausted all of my resources. Despite the unwelcome results of the work done so far, we shall start all over from scratch. Your daughter’s cooperation will of course be necessary. This calls for the tenacity to drag herself up, not from a mild depression, but from the depths of despair. To that end, I would ask that you entrust her to my personal care and keeping.”

In any other circumstances, such a mother would have answered the request with rolled eyes. But under Mephisto’s watchful gaze, all such concerns would melt away.

“I understand,” she said, bowing her head. “I appreciate all you have done for us.”

“Don’t worry about the bill. As my own priority patient, I will cover all the expenses and assign her a full-time nurse. Clothing and personal belongings are fine, but please make any arrangements beforehand with the receptionist.”

Mephisto spelled all this out in unhurried tones, then turned back to his desk. All during this time, the girl didn’t make a peep, only stared off into space. The mother finally got up and with a little urging, so did the daughter.

After they left, Mephisto looked out the window and murmured, “So the dutiful daughter kills the father while in a drunken rage? I give the mother the results of the examination in her daughter’s presence and she barely stirs. It’s probably better that she be with a nurse unknown to her. The heart of a child is always a mystery to the parent. But somehow heaven has turned its face from this child as well.”

Mephisto turned his gaze out the window with eyes that could look squarely at the darkest and harshest realities.

Chapter Two

The underground parking garage enclosed a hard and expansive space. The pipes and ducts and wires that lined the ten-foot-high ceilings performed no useful purpose, as the stale, unventilated heat and dim surroundings proved.

Outside it was high noon.

The garage was large enough to hold several hundred vehicles. The otherwise orderly concrete field was interrupted by a strange scene—a small mountain.

From the angle of its smooth surface, the base must circumscribe an area two dozen feet across. The shape suggested that an intense force had pushed the concrete up from below, and then lost its structure and form and subsided, leaving this behind.

Except that wouldn't explain the unbroken surface that, looking more closely, appeared tawny brown in color.

It was a mountain of dirt, stamped down to remove any irregularities. An oddity in a world covered with concrete. But all the more surprising was the naked body of a young man lying on top of it.

That alone wasn't so strange a sight in Demon City. In fact, it was rather charming that somebody would go to all the trouble of creating a pile of dirt in this location just so he could lie down on it. And yet there was something else, a kind of unnerving, eerie beauty about this young man, his face turned toward the heavy, gray concrete sky above him.

This was Gento Roran. But the body to match that shining and well-proportioned face—

The darkness wavered. Another presence entered the voluminous space and was moving about it. But in the depths of the gloom no physical thing stirred at all. Not among the concrete pillars. Not along the concrete walls. From whence came this whisper through the air—

A quiet *whoosh*. The kind of sound everyone heard all the time and nobody remembered.

It came from the ceiling, covered with a web of black hoses weaving around the bumps and protrusions in the concrete.

Whoosh.

Now the sound came from directly above Gento, where what looked like a black hose clung to the ceiling. Not wrapped around the pipes, but affixed directly to the concrete. Considering its length—twenty feet long

at the bare minimum—and mass, that it didn't fall to the floor was a testament to its adhesive properties.

The bulbous head swung down, unpeeling its torso from the ceiling, and forming a hook—all without evincing even the slightest tremor. Blue-green eyes flashed on either side of its head. The red tongue flicked out. Fangs jutted from the sides of its mouth.

This was a very large snake. A yard around and reaching thirty feet in length, it slithered along the ceiling. Its size alone suggested it was the lord of this large parking garage.

Whether it viewed the sleeping young man below as an intruder, or a fresh supply of meat, whether anger or glee filled its gleaming eyes—it opened its fiery red mouth aiming to swallow Gento's head whole.

The air hummed like a plucked string.

The snake's mouth gaped open wider and wider, splitting its jaw and peeling back the skin a yard along its body. With a splatter like a dash of paint and a heavy thudding sound, it fell writhing to the floor.

Slits ran through its torso, exposing the white fat and red flesh. Reverberations rang out as it twisted, struggled and reared back, and finally fled to where the invisible blades could not reach, slithering into the shadows in a manner more appropriate to its form.

Gento hadn't budged, hadn't even opened his eyes. The rich scent of flowers bloomed in profusion about him. He resembled nothing so much as a young man indulging in a rose-strewn siesta in a faraway Garden of Eden.

The stench left behind by the snake, the dark purple lines trailing away into the darkness, now corrupted that paradise.

The shadow of a human form appeared, as if following that trail, Hyota's oddly hunched over form.

"You've arrived," came the low voice from the mound of earth.

"Yes," Hyota answered, not moving from where he stood.

"And you have come to tell me you missed the mark?"

"Yes."

The result of the duel between Setsura and Hyota on a street in Kabuki-cho's Golden Gai. Seemingly knowing the answer already, the questioner did not react with anger. Neither was the respondent surprised by this foreknowledge, nor did he quake in fear of punishment. The tone, rather, was that of an investigator confirming what he already knew.



“Lay a single finger upon him, and it was impossible to fight back. I ran with all my might. He is a most frightening—genie.”

“You did well to get away. I was not certain you would ever return.”

The exchange sounded like nothing more than a heartless master addressing a lowly servant.

Hyota answered with a tight-lipped bow. “He mingled blithely with ordinary folk in order to lure us out. But Setsura Aki-sama has not discovered the seal. Though after this, I suspect that only time will hold him back. We should make that our first priority.”



"My father did not leave word of it behind. And neither did Renjo Aki. The two of them may not have even known themselves. In any case, Hyota, when will my abode be ready? Sleeping on dirt exhausts me."

"Soon." For the first time, Hyota sounded abashed. "That particular place is in a miserable condition. It is unlikely that Gento-sama's abode was destroyed, but transporting it without anybody finding out will take time."

"Does Setsura Aki know?"

"It is not possible that he does."

"Then get the job done before resuming your search for the seal. Inflict two wounds for every one suffered. Whoever gives more than he receives will gain the advantage."

"I understand, but Aki-sama has a much greater knowledge of Shinjuku and access to information than we do. Turn all the gangs in the city against him, and he still can make the slightest gust of wind, the slenderest blade of grass his ally. Listening to every word they whisper, Aki-sama would surely take the greatest advantage of any lull in the battle."

"I can see the stars." Gento's tone of voice suddenly changed. "Even sleeping in the earth. The stars talk to me. They say that he will soon find my home. What will become of me then? I can't say, but it should prove interesting."

Gento sat up on the mound of dirt. Stored somewhere out of sight, he wrapped a coat around him like the wings of a black butterfly. Calmly climbing down from his raised bed only took another second or two.

“The seal and the transport of my home I leave in your hands. I am going to face my mortal enemy.”

“Do you know where?”

“No.”

Not asking how he would go about finding him, Hyota bowed as the black shadow glided past him.

Not a word was said about the snake.

Setsura was in a corner of Shinjuku Gardens. Amidst the dirt and rubble, there remained not a smidgen of the groomed landscapes that had once offered the city’s urban residents a moment of respite from the mad rush. The lawns covering the area were given over to mosses of strange colors and unknown origins. These squirming mosses were “alive” in the faunal as well as the floral sense, throbbing in syncopation to the ominous beat of a telltale heart lurking beneath.

Nor was it mere urban rumor that a sound accompanied each beat, or that each heavy pulse could be felt through the soles of the feet.

Scientists from outside the ward studying these sounds using infrasonic analysis counted eighty to ninety beats a minute, a living sound, almost identical to that of a human being. But what kind of living thing, for its “body” reached a mile in length and covered three dozen acres.

This conclusion had been drawn fourteen years before, and the location pointed to the very center of Shinjuku Gardens. But perhaps serving as a defensive perimeter, the earth was piled at a radius of several hundred yards around it, and thriving with mutant vegetation—not a place where a sane man ever ventured.

The center of Shinjuku Gardens was said to be home to around thirty-five hundred different species, thirty percent of which were crammed into that cramped corner.

This scientific mother lode had yielded not only botanical curiosities, but promising treatments for cancer and stroke and other incurable diseases beyond the reach of medicine. However, since several dozen adventurers and prospectors ventured in and disappeared, nobody else had tried.

Setsura was standing in an area near Yotsuya on the outer edge of the inner ring. The twilight was falling. His shadow cut a graceful silhouette on the ground at his feet, the result of the thirty streetlamps installed by the ward government.

There was one fifteen feet directly behind him. More than protecting the vagrants who might otherwise stumble into the Gardens at night, their primary purpose was to shed light upon whatever creepy-crawlies might be thinking of leaving.

Here and there just beyond the penumbras of light lay the slumbering

forms of the homeless and vagrant workers. Without a bed to call their own, the unknown vegetation inside the Gardens was preferable to the known risk of gangsters and monsters outside it.

A slight frown rose to Setsura's face. He sensed a presence and heard footsteps approaching.

The figure appeared inside the cone of light three minutes later, as if pushing the veil of dusk aside. He was wearing sunglasses and a polo shirt and had a slightly shady air about him. Not a nine-to-five kind of guy.

"Aki-san, I presume?" he asked warily.

"And you are Sasaki-san?"

Such a laid-back inquiry from the man who'd designated such a place and such a time set the reporter a bit at ease—the same one who'd shot Gento Roran in the interrogation room of Shinjuku police station.

"You've got yourself some good connections," Setsura said.

Sasaki nodded. "I stopped by your place but it was closed. A waste of time if I hadn't been familiar with the old lady at the tobacco store."

He must have put together a dossier on the grandma in Kabuki-cho's old hotel district, said to be the very first information broker in Shinjuku—though that didn't explain how he'd managed to touch bases with Setsura, who'd been up and about the city since leaving his safe house that morning.

"At any rate, here we are. Hear me out—I'm not above rewarding useful information."

"How about as the reward, you tell me your side of the story?" Setsura said with a hint of a yawn. Hardly surprising, considering the deadly duel he'd gone through that day.

"I'd like to find out what you know first. After that—"

"Fine with me."

They stood there talking for a dozen or so minutes. Sasaki recounted what he'd told Gento.

"You've done your homework. Unfortunately, I haven't anything more to add. You seem to know more than I do about the subject."

"That's too bad. That just leaves the two people at the heart of the matter. And if Gento-sama won't cough up any details, that leaves you."

"Gento won't?" Setsura stared at the reporter with evident surprise. "You mean you went to him looking for material?"

"Ah, well—" Sasaki said vaguely. He'd kept mum about meeting with Gento, fearing that Setsura would clam up. Push come to shove, he'd catch him upside the head and loosen his tongue with a little electroshock therapy.

He'd shown his cards too early, but there was no regretting it now. As if sensing something in back of him, he turned his face toward the

darkness behind him, like it was the middle of the day.

"A tail, eh?" Setsura said.

Sasaki was the one amazed. "Don't talk rubbish. Yeah, we talked, but he didn't lay a finger on me."

"You can track someone without doing the tango together." Setsura's sharp words were a complete contrast with the languid look on his face. "Long odds, I thought, whether this was the wrong or right place to meet up—either way, if you think your life is worth saving—though trying would probably be a waste of time now."

With these ominous words hanging in the air, the flustered Sasaki barked, "Hey, what are you talking about? What the hell is that?"

Setsura ignored him and raised his right arm in a graceful wave. What looked like a glimmering spider's thread floated out from the cone of light at Setsura. On the verge of exiting the ring of light, another thread tangled with it. As if the mass had suddenly increased, it fluttered and fell to the earth.

In the next moment, Setsura sprang off the damp ground with amazing speed and without making a sound. Not surprising, considering the lightness of his steps as he veered off the path and plunged into the center of the noxious undergrowth.

"Hey! Wait up! Hey!" Sasaki called out behind him.

Setsura paid no mind to the shining thread coiled after him like a persistent insect as the air rushed in the space where he'd just been.

The scene around Setsura abruptly changed. The weeds around his ankles shot up to his waist, took on striped and spotted colors, and shook their petals in the disturbed air, coughing out a yellowish pollen. The outlines of Setsura's body grew hazy inside the cloud of pollen.

No sooner had the scene taken on a semblance of normality, but he flung himself deeper into the thick foliage.

Red and green and purple pollen and sap in unearthly hues, bursting with sweet and nauseous smells, rained down on his head and shoulders. Covered by the psychedelic colors, Setsura came to a halt amidst the shrubbery.

Silence fell, interrupted by a moan like the moo of a cow. A frog-like creature hopped through the undergrowth, scales glittering in the moonlight. A foul miasma rose up from the ground like a bank of humid air, as if rising off a fetid tropic swamp.

Stranger still, despite the profusion of plant life, there was not the single buzz of an insect. From further away came the sound of footsteps.

"Hey!" called out Sasaki. "Aki-kun! Aki-kun!"

"Idiot," Setsura sighed.

The footsteps approached, stomping through the grass. When they came within several yards, Setsura cut laterally through the undergrowth toward the narrow path Sasaki was on.

"Yo, Aki-kun," Sasaki said, like he was greeting an old friend. He

stepped forward.

Setsura caught the glitter of light out of the corner of his eye. A red line transected Sasaki's neck, biting deeper in pace with each step. Only Setsura's eyes could have perceived so fine a line, and it parted the flesh so effortlessly that Sasaki did not appear to even feel it as he kept on going.

The red line passed through to the other side. Scattering fresh blood under the bright moonlight, his head toppled off his shoulders. Similar lines ran down the headless body, his arms severing at the shoulders, his torso neatly divided crosswise and lengthwise and tumbling in pieces to the ground.

The scent of blood covered the ground. The head sitting there upright still sported the same pleasantly relieved smile.

"Served his purpose, eh?" Setsura said to himself.

The death trap that had taken Sasaki's head must have already been set up and waiting for him when they met. Setsura had arrived expecting as much. Gento had probably tagged Sasaki when they met for exactly this purpose.

But how had he nailed down this specific location? Gento could have easily planted a nanotech transmitter and tracking device on him the size of a poppy seed, though Setsura was inclined to believe that he would have relied on something far more particular to his target, and likely a lot more intimidating.

Chapter Three

The miasma parted in front of him. Somebody was coming down the path. Bathed in the white moonlight, Setsura calmly waited for the enemy to arrive.

A pale face rose up in the mists a dozen feet away from him, about the same height as his own.

The word “cherubic” sprang to mind, meaning angels mingling among humans disguised as children. Amakusa Shiro, the teenaged samurai who led the Christian rebellion at Shimabara in 1638, was often described in similar terms, a person possessed of a disposition, intelligence and appearance that, at a glance, were obviously not of this world.

The countenance in front of his eyes had all of those qualities. Though whatever angels sent him down from heaven were surely in league with the devil.

Setsura and Gento Roran. The world knew nothing of the menace lurking in any showdown between these two. Fifteen years condensed into a single moment as these two beautiful genies came face to face.

“Sorry if it sounds trite, but long time, no see.” Gento gazed around him, deeply impressed. “Shinjuku Gardens has certainly changed.”

“I met Hyota,” Setsura said, as if talking about time gone by with an old friend. “He’s getting on there.”

“He says he couldn’t get the upper hand. The same as fifteen years ago.”

“Aw, you’re making me blush.” Setsura scratched his head.

Sasaki’s severed limbs and head lay in a sea of blood at their feet. The odor of his ruptured entrails wafted up.

This was a conversation between two genies. “By the way, Setsura,” Gento said, stepping forward. The moonlight revealed him to be about the same height as Setsura. He was also wearing a black slicker. “Dig up any leads about the seal?”

“Nope.” Setsura shook his head, sending the kaleidoscopic pollen flitting through the moonlight like the scales of a fish. “Not a clue. But I haven’t looked. My father only told me to keep you and yours from laying your hands on it. That raises a good question—how to guard something I’ve never seen. He must not have known either. What about you? Hyota seems to think it was in a good place.”

"I don't know what he's been telling you, but it looks like you are no better informed than I am."

"My father said with his parting words that you guys buried it somewhere."

"Come to think about it, it is odd. Somewhere out there for the taking, and you determined to protect it. But what is it? And where? And why do the two of us remain in the dark?"

"One more thing to add to your puzzle box," Setsura said, raising a finger. "What happens when the seal is opened?"

"Quite right," Gento said with a faint smile.

Stranger still, these two were prepared to launch into yet another death match over something without knowing what it was and what it was supposed to do.

"Though my father said that the two of us being roused to action would affect the seal in some way. We should be seeing its omens and portents already."

"You mean, giants clawing their way out of the earth, words written in blood across the sky, that sort of thing? Or maybe one day all the dogs bark an octave lower."

"Well, that would be something to keep our eyes and ears out for," Gento said quietly. He shifted his stance. A croak arose from his feet as he stepped on the big frog-like creature. The wriggling webbed feet stuck out from beneath black soles.

"Gross," said Setsura.

"Listen," Gento said with a scowl, "No matter what happens, is there any reason for us to be enemies? What good comes from the one of us shedding the blood of the other?"

"I'd say that was a self-evident truth. I've got a *senbei* shop to run. It's grossing thirty million a year. Makes me wonder about continuing to moonlight as a P.I. Opening branches outside Shinjuku would be a lot more profitable. This is just a little side business I indulge in when I've got a few hours to kill."

"In other words," Gento said with a wry smile, "I've upset the applecart on your boring and predictable life. There's one way to remedy that. Join forces. We won't know what's in that seal until we find it. Depending on its uses, there may even be some profit in it too. For all we know, we could end up with the world on a string. What do you say? A mutual effort for the common good?"

"You've been stewing over it for fifteen years and this is what you come up with?" Setsura said with a tired sigh, "How bathetic. We both know how it's going to end. We'll be back at each other's throats as soon it shows up." Having stated the obvious he concluded, "Let's settle matters here and now, especially while your knowledge of this city remains lacking."

Gento smiled like an angel. A sharp, painful bleat followed by a

mushy crushing sound welled up from the ground as he squashed the frog beneath his foot.

Seeing something in that expression, Setsura Aki vaulted backwards, a black leaf carried by the wind. A myriad of spider's threads sprang after him, while other glittering filaments knocked them out of the sky—Setsura's unique titanium-steel devil wires.

They cut through the wind and sliced through the darkness. A moment later the look on Setsura's face wavered. Those devil wires had been seized by another swarm of threads. Devil wires that could sever high-carbon steel and equally unbreakable strands—

"The sword cannot cut itself," Gento said with an entrancing grin.

The filaments floated through the air towards their target, ready to tear the body limb from limb, no different in their application and use as Setsura's devil wires. And no less unbelievable, made of the same substance.

"That last one was intended to do some serious damage. The tree of knowledge my father instilled within me is beginning to bear fruit. I will continue to move inexorably forward."

The sleeves of his coat fluttered. Another tangled braid of threads soared forth. Setsura was forced to retreat again. The ghostly blades missed him by a hair, snipping off the stalks of the foliage as he slipped deeper into the underbrush, sending petals raining to the ground.

As long as his movements stirred the air, the demon strands would follow. His feet sank slightly into the ground. The black surface of the water stretched out behind him. The lake in the center of Shinjuku Gardens covered 615 square yards, now known as the Black Lagoon.

The moon reflected like a silver plate off the surface of the lake. Soaring above the scene was a twisted and mutated zelkova tree.

His path of retreat blocked, Setsura sent a bundle of three devil wires at Gento's quietly encroaching demon strands, entwined them and turned them aside.

"The next one splits you in two," Gento said, approaching from the path. "I thought of giving you another chance, but it'd only be a waste of time. We've hardly gotten to know each other."

"The feeling is mutual," Setsura agreed with a nod, seemingly unaware of the rippling surface of the lake at his back. "Well, then," he said with a casual smile. "What do you say we wrap things up?"

Gento started. The enemy had changed right before his eyes. The shape and form was the same, but the *substance* was different.

Setsura waved his right hand. The demon strands entwining his devil wires all broke apart.

"Hoh."

"You still have a ways to go, Gento."

The easy-going *senbei* shop owner was now nowhere to be found. Unfathomable depths lurked behind his smile. A ghostly aura cloaked

the beautiful genie that was Setsura Aki, that caught even Gento off guard.

"I let you go unscathed as well, in order to draw you here."

"You don't say. Then perhaps we take this from the start once again."

"No, there is no going back." He slowly shook his head. His words were suffused with what could only be called a demonic air of confidence. "I am standing in the field. You came along the path. Like I said, Gento, you have got a lot to learn."

"What the hell?"

He reacted not out of fear, but because at that moment a foul stench and a fierce ague made his body shake. He retched and writhed like a prawn.

"The plants here have curious properties. Every species becomes poisonous to the others at night, so covering yourself with the pollen of all of them immunizes yourself against the effects. But you came along the path where the pollen doesn't reach. Only the poison. Not everybody who lives in Shinjuku knows this, but anybody with a desire to learn can find out. It appears your father was not one of them."

Gento glowered at him. A gruesome loathing filled those bloodshot eyes. The cherub sent down by the fallen angels had transformed into a ghoulish child.

Here was one monster caught in the trap and subjected to the torments of hell by another perhaps no less monstrous. The outpourings of the ghostly auras was caught up by the wind. The magical threads danced through the silver light. The contest was surely already over.

A soft and certain voice rose up. "Another legend has it that a strange creature emerges from this lake on moonlit nights. Like this!"

Timing this pronouncement to the approach and appearance of that presence behind him, Setsura jumped out of the way just as the dark shadow split the surface of the lake, grazed past him, leapt through the air and aimed at Gento.

At first glance, this was an animal who'd swallowed so much water it'd blown up like a balloon. But the thing definitely was human, with two arms and two legs. The blue-black skin was swollen, split and peeling from years stuck at the bottom of the lake. Rivulets of dark water streamed off a plaid flannel shirt.



— g e n t o —

With a shout of surprise, Gento raised his right hand. A myriad of invisible silver threads tore at the creature, wrapped around the body and sliced through the limbs. But the dripping water knit the pieces

together and not a finger dropped off.

“He’s known as Bog Kobo of Shinjuku Gardens. He came here to fish one day and drowned. The elements in the water transformed his corpse into this creature from the Black Lagoon. You can’t cut water, so no blade can hurt him. Where are you going to run now, Gento? How about you join forces with *him* and spend the next fifteen years literally treading water?”

Setsura’s question shot like a spear from the weeds and bushes. Gento tried to jump backwards, but sank to his knees with a hacking cough. With a splish and a splash, the watery creature—its cells turned entirely to water—reared up over Gento as if to engulf him in a wave—

A thunderous roar scorched the wind. Bog Kobo staggered. Flames licked at his head and chest. Napalm was the likely cause. The hellish oily orange fire flowed like burning fuel over water, turning those accursed cells into steam.

Now Bog Kobo was the one writhing in torment.

Setsura flung a devil wire in Gento’s direction as he bolted for the cover of the undergrowth. He felt no response in his hand. It slipped off him. In the split second he’d been distracted by the conflagration, a lubricating substance had poured from the treetops and covered Gento’s body.

“That you, Hyota?” Setsura called up into the trees.

“Aye.” The voice was that of the four-legged beast he’d encountered in Golden Gai.

“Just like before, eh? You and your fat to the rescue. But the third time’s not always the charm. What next?”

“Do whatever you like. But don’t think I’m coming down from this tree.”

“I appreciate your prudence. But you’re free to go.”

That presence in the treetops wavered.

“Well? I may change my mind if you don’t leave right away. What I’m saying is, I’m impressed that you would stick by your master with death waiting in the wings. It’s the kind of thing *I* would do, though not so much *me*.”

Setsura felt the heat on his face. Bog Kobo lumbered toward him. Enough of him had billowed off in steam that he was already a size smaller. Seeking the comrades he lived with at the bottom of the lake, he stretched his melting arms out in front of him.

And abruptly leaned heavily to the left. Along a line from the left side of his sternum to his right hip, the upper half of his body slid off and fell into the water with a fiery splash. A long second later, the lower half followed and disappeared into the black water.

Except that Setsura was the one who said that Bog Kobo couldn’t be sliced asunder. Without a backwards glance at the wave washing onto the beach, he gazed up at Hyota’s hiding place.

“Gone, eh?” he said coolly. “Gento couldn’t cut him but *I* could. However *I* might have the upper hand now, that will not likely be the case the next time we meet. What an annoying foe he has become.”

Part Six: Hunter and Hunted

Chapter One

The same voice as always from beyond the sliding screen doors. “C’mon, honey. It’s been a rough one. Look, I haven’t had a drop all day!”

“No, Kanauchi-san. You always say that, and then when the time comes—I said no!”

Followed by the sound of one mouth wetly covering the other, the creaking of the bed as two bodies fell upon it.

Her lover of late was the sixtyish owner of a woodworking shop. He didn’t have a hair on his head. But from the neck down his body was covered by a thick coat of fur. Boasting of his animal spirits, he claimed that every wife and widow in the neighborhood was his for the taking.

Rumors said he had access to drugs that were hard to come by even in Demon City.

“Ah—” Her mother’s voice. And she was surely already buck naked, shedding her clothes the second she hit the bed.

The screen doors were open. Not merely an inch, but revealing a thick gap of darkness. Perhaps the carpenter had left it like that, but equally likely her mother had. When it came to the persuasive power of money, she was one to let the ends justify the means.

Mayumi stared through the darkness filling that gap. A history book about Shinjuku from the library sat open on the desk behind her, patiently waiting for her attention to once again be directed its way.

Light spilled into the next room. She could begin to make out the bodies squirming like tangled leeches in the midst of the blackness. Everything else could easily be imagined.

Her mother pinned to the bed, him lapping at her cheeks and nose and forehead, continuously licking her eyelids, because he knew that was her most sensitive spot. Her mother gasped uncontrollably and pleaded for him to stop—

While she waited for him to press his lips against hers and force his tongue into her mouth. Her throat hummed as she drank him down.

His caresses attuned to her age, his fingers and tongue exhibited an intimate knowledge of her senses as they played across her skin, drawing out the exquisite pleasures until her entire body was soaking with sweat and saliva.

“Louder,” the carpenter ordered her.

“No, Mayumi will hear,” the mother protested, her voice shaking with arousal and expectation.

“What’s the problem? She’s your daughter. She’s gotta be getting it on with the customers too?”

“That girl is different.”

“What’s different? She’s *your* daughter. Another nympho just like you. A little bird told me the boss bought it ‘cause he did it with her. Quite the girl, offing her old man like that.”

“Quit it—*ahhh*—”

The carpenter dove in between her legs while thrusting his taut member between her lips. He was a big man, the word was. Mayumi’s mother wrapped both hands around his impressive girth and sucked him in a trance.

And so the old man and the cougar went down on each other in a burning phantasm of oral sex.

The carpenter flipped her around and grabbed her thighs, his fat fingers sinking deep into the flesh, and buried his engorged cock inside her. She made a cooing sound, chirping like a bird. She raised her hips, the pleasure mounting as he plunged down deeper. An act of pure copulation, sex in its rawest form.

She climaxed with a gasp and a long moan.

The next sound was that of the sliding doors rattling open. Mayumi took in the strange scene—his entire frame covered with fur. Only his head was hairless. On the carpenter’s face was clear evidence of the drugs.

The shape-shifting drug accelerant was originally the byproduct of a metabolic amplifier developed by a pharmaceutical company outside the ward.

With its emphasis on restoring the endurance and appetite of a wild animal, because of the primordial violence and brutal animal natures aroused by these compounds, they were banned outside Shinjuku. Just as they were celebrated in Demon City.

Ignoring the risk of being unable to return to normal, a mixing and matching of drugs could result in a beast of unrivaled capabilities. A man merely stronger than average could take on the strength of a gorilla and the speed of a leopard and the man-eating appetites of a lion. A combination that was quickly preferred among bank robbers.

As was to be expected, the authorities stepped up the severity of the countermeasures and prohibited the use of ninety-eight varieties that boosted power and resilience. But they continued to sell well on the black market, a hundred milligrams for only a hundred thousand yen, well within a middle-class budget.

The carpenter may have taken the drugs for their original purposes, but the accumulation of side-effects eventually took on the drastic forms that Mayumi now witnessed.

A ragged red strip hung limply from the carpenter's mouth, one side white, the other side crimson. Meat. Her mother's flesh, Mayumi thought. The man had sunk his teeth in a woman, hardly an unexpected act for a carnivorous beast.

Mayumi heard the carpenter chewing and crunching, and couldn't help thinking he sounded like a man chomping down on a juicy steak.

"It's delicious, Mayumi-chan," he said with a satisfied boast. "Your mom tastes good. Just the right amount of fat. But Mayumi-chan, you look lip-smacking."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mayumi said, without a twitch of an eyebrow.

The carpenter transformed like this every time he fucked her mother. There were devotees of the drug among the establishment's customers as well, including the ones who made a drinking game out of showing off how far they could mutate.

"Take a look at this," said the carpenter. He reached down to his crotch and held up its hot, dripping, brutish shape, a match for nothing in Mayumi's knowledge. The tawny flesh, like rough leather, was crisscrossed with veins. His own hand wasn't enough to fully encircle its girth, an organ guaranteed to render any woman breathless with ecstasy.

"You want a taste too, Mayumi-chan? No need to beg. Cop a feel and see for yourself. Your father's dead. I'm your daddy now. We're all okay with that, right? There's plenty in my reservoirs left to share. I'll fill you up to the brim."

His face flushed, his voice climbing in pitch, turning himself on with the lewdness of his own propositions. Mayumi didn't move. The transformations of the carpenter didn't frighten her. She couldn't have cared less either way.

The carpenter stood in front of her and thrust the spout of his thick hose in her face. "Take a good, long look, baby."

Mayumi's eyes didn't budge, only fixed on an empty point in space. The carpenter grabbed her hair and pulled her mouth in front of his cock. Mayumi turned her face to the side. He held her firmly with both hands. She shook her head. The carpenter wasn't giving up on his goal so easily.

He pinched her nose. A long second later, she opened her mouth. He plunged into her with a triumphal cry, burying his whole length inside the seventeen-year-old girl. She felt a sharp stinging across the bridge of her nose from the feral bristles of his pubes.

When she struggled for breath, he released the hold on her nose. "No biting, see, or there'll be hell to pay."

His hips rocked forward and back. Mayumi had no choice but to go along, as if her dainty lips had swallowed a python coiled around the carpenter's waist. The king of the apes had kicked out Tarzan and was

having at it with Jane.

“Hey, but if you want to bite, go ahead, and I’ll do the same to you, and then your mother. C’mon, put your tongue into it. I bet you’ve packed a lot of experience into those seventeen years.”

The hairs of the man-beast stood on end. “Oh, fuck—yeah, baby—knew it wasn’t the first time for you—just like your mama—she knows how to go down on a man too—”

Stroked by Mayumi’s warm, wet tongue, excited by his own perverse pillow talk, the carpenter grew hotter and harder, exposing, in a sense, his true essence.

“Man, I’d take you down there too, but don’t rightly want to end up like your daddy. Put on that virginal face and then get me off like that, shit, that’s a Shinjuku girl for you—whoa—whoa—*holy*—”

His voice rose to a hoarse cry as he came in Mayumi’s mouth. He pulled out and delivered the next shot an inch away from her nose. A creamy sensation and the musky odor coated her face and dripped from her cheeks.

“That’s a good girl,” the carpenter panted, half-crazed by the thrill of having his way with a teenager the age of his own grandchild. “Show daddy the nice present he gave you. No throwing it away, now. Let’s see.”

Mayumi shook her head.

“I haven’t got all day,” said the carpenter, his voice tinged with menace. His hand tightened around her chin. Her cheekbones creaked beneath the brutish strength. When he relaxed his hold, the viscous bodily fluids welled up at the corners of her mouth.

“Good, good,” he growled, his eyes glazed in ecstasy, oblivious that he’d started jerking his own self off. He’d had the girl in his sights for a while, had fantasized about doing her like this. His dream had come true. He’d never gotten turned on so fast, so easy, or come to such a satisfying conclusion.

The carpenter scooped up a bit of his handiwork dribbling down her chin and stuck it into Mayumi’s mouth.

“Now we’re going to finish off with a bang and you’re going to drink it all down. I wanna see that cute throat of yours throb. Down there in your stomach, my boys are gonna invade your whole body. Dirty sons a bitches. ‘Cause I ain’t human, see. I’m a beast. Once the beast is in you, it *never* lets go. That’s daddy’s special cock sauce for you. Hurry up. Do your thing.”

She didn’t have a choice and she didn’t give a damn. He poured himself into her and she swallowed down the beastly seed.

“Fucking-A!” the carpenter moaned.

A maddening desire burned inside him. The feeling of an itch that could not be scratched crawled down his shaft.

“Once more, baby. Once more. Get a little hand action in there this

time.”

“Oh, give it a break,” Mayumi said in a weary voice. Her face was covered with come and her lips coated with milky cream. She was disgusted with her own disgusting state.

The carpenter grabbed her hand and curled it around his member and pumped it back and forth. Two ragged breaths later, he threw his head back beneath the overhead fluorescent light. Followed by the strangled sound of trying to force air down his throat.

Mayumi fixed her indifferent gaze upon him as his face darkened and turned purple. She watched the same thing happen a week ago. That time, it was her father, his cock growing big and hard inside her mouth. Then grabbing it, glistening with her saliva as he gasped for air, his back arched in the last moments before suffocation.

The carpenter was whacking himself off. On the verge of his heart stopping, all he wanted to do was come.

A sound like the report of a machine gun exploded from his throat. His back bent to the breaking point. With his last breath, the thick, white thread flew through the air and splashed across Mayumi’s mouth and chin.

He had completed his conquest, just like her father.

Mayumi lay back and listened to the carpenter crumbling onto the tatami mats like a rotted out tree. The strange aroma stuck to her face and coated the inside of her mouth.

She got up and went to the kitchen and ran the water in the sink, filled a glass, and rinsed out her mouth. Ten times. She washed her face. The hand soap was out so she used dishwashing liquid instead, and scrubbed herself until she smelled of disinfectant.

“Ma—Mayumi—”

A voice like that of a disembodied ghost rose up behind her. She didn’t turn around. It was her mother.

“What did you do—to poor Kanauchi-san—what—what happened —?”

Mayumi didn’t answer. Hardly a question her mother needed to ask. Once she had passed out, the carpenter’s intentions toward her daughter should hardly have been a mystery to her. And what would become of him then.

“Just like my father,” Mayumi intoned.

“What are you saying?”

“Just like my father. He just fucked me different. The results are the same. Mom, why do you bring such dirt bags home with you?”

“Why—” She hesitated. Her daughter’s words stung. In the moment of silence, darker thoughts welled up. “Kanauchi-san cares about us. How were we going to keep this place going after your father died? Half of our customers came here just to see him. With him gone, we didn’t have a choice but to keep somebody like Kanauchi-san around!”

“Bullshit!” said Mayumi, whirling around, her body and voice trembling.

She stopped and stared. The pink negligee her mother was wearing was stained red from the chest down. In the faint light, the outlines of her body stood out clearly against the wet fabric.

All the buttons were undone, exposing her ample thirty-six inch bust and damp thighs and the dark triangle between her legs.

“Mom—your breast—”

Her mother’s right hand rose to her chest and touched the torn flesh. “This? Kanauchi-san took a bite out of me. It’s nothing. A little artificial skin and it patches up fine. You should know by now, a man likes to eat a woman in more ways than one. Yeah, normally they settle for licking and sucking, but they really want to sink their teeth into us. Kanauchi-san says I taste real good.”

“But—like that—and more than once—”

“It’s no big deal. I shoot myself up before going to bed. It stings a bit but a little acting takes care of the rest. You get it, don’t you? After this, I’ll do what I have to do to raise you. That’s why Kanauchi-san was so important. And you couldn’t put up with a little roughhousing—”

A little roughhousing—? The cool fluorescent light glimmered off Mayumi’s cheeks. She could almost believe she was crying.

“You killed your father the same way.” Sensing weakness in her daughter, her mother’s voice took on a high-handed tone. “You kept mum to that doctor, but you’ve killed four. Your father and three after that.”

Mayumi shook her head, but without conviction. There was no use denying it. Before she knew it, her mother had silently crossed the threshold. She loomed over her. Mayumi retreated until her back was against the sink.

“Mom—stop it—”

“Relax.” Her mother smiled. A strange light sparked in her eyes. “I’m not going to do anything to you. Only I’m going to have you fixed by this doctor I know. We’re not going back to that quack, Mephisto. A real underworld doctor. The sooner we see him the better, no?”

She seized Mayumi by the wrist. For the first time in her life, Mayumi felt the full force of her mother’s strength. She tried to shake herself loose. Her mother yanked her closer, her countenance like hot coals, her breath licking at Mayumi’s cheeks like a blowtorch.

Mayumi felt a cold shock of fear run through her veins. This was the face of a she-devil. Mayumi pushed back, her hand digging into the raw wound in her breast.

Her mother reeled backwards, crashing into the table and then falling to the floor. Mayumi whirled around. The kitchen door and the fire escape were only a few feet away. She took a step—

A claw-like hand clamped around her ankle. She was only lucky

enough to keep from falling on her face.

“Little bitch—do you think you can just run away?” her mother hissed, her fingers curled around her leg.

These weren’t the words of a mother to a daughter, but those of a demon guarding the gates of hell.

Chapter Two

Mayumi stared back at her mother. She had transformed. Her eyes became a pair of red slashes beneath her brows. White fangs jutted from her mouth.

“Ma—yu—mi—” she growled.

The inflection of her voice was completely different, her vocal cords having mutated as well. The carpenter wasn’t the only one availing himself of drugs for “improved” sexual performance.

Only dabbling at first, the side effects hadn’t manifested themselves in the past, but were probably drawn to the surface by her elevated emotional state. In any case, it was hard to imagine how such a mother and such a daughter could share a life now.

Mayumi screamed. She tried to kick free. Her mother held on like a vise. Mayumi abruptly turned cool and composed. She knew what she had to do. She and her mother would never see eye to eye again. The path ahead of her was crystal clear.

She twisted her body, planted both hands on the edge of the sink and hoisted herself up. Right in front of her were the stove and the knife rack.

Which one would be right for the job—a chef’s knife for slicing off a limb, a long, thin sashimi knife for close combat.

She grabbed the latter just as her mother released her hold on her ankle and started to stand up. Her shoulders were almost twice their normal width, her arms practically reached the floor. The hard, grating sound came from her teeth grinding together. A frightful loathing radiated from her eyes.

Mayumi wasn’t frightened. The sashimi knife glinted in her right hand. As she lumbered to her feet, her mother’s throat was exposed and unprotected.

Mayumi swung the knife with all her might. She felt the gruesome impact. A slit opened its mouth like a crescent moon beneath the double chin and smiled at her. Blood welled up at the corners and spilled down her chest like a dam giving way.

Mayumi felt a fresh and exhilarating surge, as if the knife had also severed the bonds entwining her. She turned on the faucet and washed the gore off the blade. Not in the manner of a criminal covering up a crime, but simply wanting to tidy up before she left.

Her mother still stood there, her mouth flapping open but no sounds coming out, as if she'd mounted the stage and forgotten her lines and was frantically trying to improvise.

"I don't want to hear what you have to say anyway, Mom."

Mayumi slid the knife back into the rack. Her mother didn't move. As she frantically tried to regain her voice, Mayumi pulled on her sneakers and left. She didn't hurry and she didn't look back.

The condo was over the bar her mother ran. At the moment, she couldn't remember the name. If she ever did again, she'd do her best to forget it.



Not sparing either a second look, she wheeled the folding scooter out of the rear entrance to the building and onto the street.

Shinjuku at night revealed the true face of Demon City in all its gaudy glory.

The glare of the neon lights and bass beat of the music flowing out of the bars and clubs turned the high streets of Kabuki-cho and Shinjuku Nichome into a mad province of hell, prowled by addicts desperate to the point of violence to score some change, with monsters lurking in the dark shadows in the abandoned buildings waiting for the right pedestrian to pass close by.

When the night fell, the regular beat cops retreated to the station and manned the phones while the commando police took to the streets.

Even wearing heavy combat suits and armed with laser cannons on loan from the SDF, this elite corps of battle-hardened soldiers still saw several go missing every month. They weren't casualties of violent confrontations. Rather, they simply vanished into thin air during patrols.

Not even the strongest man dared venture down the gloomy side streets without packing a submachine gun at the bare minimum.

The most dangerous areas in the city were Ichigaya-Kawada, Toyama, West Waseda, and the west entrance to Chuo Park, though a good twenty others were considered too great a risk for average folk.

The four areas marked as general safety zones were Shimo'ochiai, Shinanomachi, Okubo, and Kagurazaka.

The special housing blocks designated by the ward were surrounded by security barricades charged to fifty-thousand volts and guarded by Doppler radar systems, heavy machine guns and 90 mm rocket launchers.

These districts were restricted to ward government VIPs only, such as doctors, lawyers, academics and other notables who had "contributed to the progress and welfare of the city" (to the tune of fifty million yen).

Everywhere else, it went without saying, the watchword was *caveat emptor*.

Research specimens that had escaped from the Ichigaya Genomic Research Center had since grown by leaps and bounds and prowled about the city at night. Working twenty-four seven, complete eradication was currently projected to take another 9,250 years.

Organisms with DNA tweaked to increase aggressiveness and physical size propagated in the wild. Or perhaps several years afterwards, the native species had incorporated them, their natural plasticity assimilating those characteristics.

- Carnivorous rats a foot long and weighing over two pounds.
- Poisonous snakes wended their way through the city streets, with no respect to natural boundaries or time of day.
- Birds of prey had taken up residence in the ruined skyscrapers, swooping down on anything weighing up to sixty pounds.

- Squids and jellyfish of unknown constitution and form inhabited the sewer systems and reached up from every manhole in the city to snare careless pedestrians.

- Spiders a yard wide with fangs that could puncture sheet metal and weaving sticky webs that could stop a tank in its tracks.

Based on firsthand accounts, over four hundred dangerous species of unknown origins and capabilities. The city's Bureau of Statistics calculated that a new species spawned every five hours. The only saving grace in the numbers was that the vast majority weren't fit enough to survive this strange environment and went extinct almost immediately.

But the totals still came to over four hundred. Wandering about every day and every night, with only four districts where "public safety" could actually be assured, the most secure street in the city could never truly be secured.

Mayumi grabbed the rear wheel of the folding scooter and yanked it out, then unfolded the handlebars. The 50 cc one horsepower engine gave it a top speed of forty miles per hour. She climbed on the scooter, twisted the throttle, and took off with a puff of gray exhaust.

She had no place to go, nobody to run to. She had killed her father. She was the kind of girl who belonged here. In a place where the literal act was hardly out of the question, there were a thousand ways to skin a cat. That's why it was called Demon City.

She'd look for work in Kabuki-cho first. Mayumi steered the scooter toward Okubo Avenue.

The bar was in Kikuicho, not far from the Shinjuku power station. Several years before, a certain "religious rite" triggering a certain "glacier panic" had broken out there. Everything was back to "normal" now, or at least that was the official line that everybody was sticking to.

Mayumi sped along at forty miles per hour. The street was devoid of traffic, and she reached Okubo Avenue several minutes later.

Once upon a time, she could have proceeded straight to Meiji Avenue and then into Shinjuku proper. But Toyama—one of the most dangerous places in the city—was now smack dab in the way. Detour through Wakamatsu and Ichigaya-Kawada was smack dab in the way. All the other routes would take her too far out of the way.

Mayumi chose the Wakamatsu corridor.

A three-hundred-foot-long snake was said to occupy the Fuji Television studios in Kawadacho. Maybe she should make herself its next meal. She was a man-eater herself. The carpenter, her father—four men altogether. Any man who left his seed inside her died.

Except for her father, they'd been patrons of the bar. They all said they'd been hankering to do her. One was on his way home from high

school. Another came after her when she was asleep, helping himself to the inventory and *her* while her father was away.

All of them died minutes after coming inside her. With the first two, *serves them right*, was all she thought. When her father died on top of her, she started getting worried.

The poisons of Demon City must have impregnated her body. She'd heard that professional *femme fatales* had been bioengineered to do just that. One gang had surgically implanted an injection device into the body of a beautiful woman and used her to assassinate an enemy godfather.

The symptoms suggested that the men who'd had their way with Mayumi had all died of heart seizures. The police detected nothing amiss. Her mother dismissed her concerns and blamed it on bad luck and mere coincidence.

Her lackadaisical attitude vanished when her father succumbed right before her eyes. "You are a poisonous offspring," she'd said, with a demonic air of her own. "I didn't believe it at first, but now—"

They were both half-crazy by now. Her mother was exploring ways to expand the bar and Mayumi's young body figured into her plans. The man before her father had visited the second floor with her mother's "permission," knowing that Mayumi would be there alone.

He was the owner of a thriving local business. If that's what a man believed it took to get ahead, Mayumi wasn't going to waste any sleep worrying about the consequences, or debating the moral differences between life and death.

A strange sense of liberation filled her chest. She was choosing life. Kill her father and murder her mother—she'd happily bear that burden for the rest of her days if that was the only way she could take control of her own life.

Demon City was the place where she chose to plant her stake.

Bright beams of light flashed down the dark street from a bank of gleaming white globes. Confronted by the wall of light, Mayumi squeezed the brake lever. She pitched forward against the handlebars. The tires squealed against the asphalt.

As if in a slow-motion dream, the bike twisted sideways. Her blood ran cold. She was moments from death. Shifting her weight ever so slightly, releasing and applying the brake and throttle with unexpected precision, her right foot brushed the ground before the scooter righted itself.

"Not bad," said a shadow behind the globe of light, the headlight of a 750 cc motorcycle.

Like they were just waiting for someone like her to come along. Mayumi knew at a glance that whatever they had in mind wasn't in her best interests.

"Don't move," barked another voice, full of derision and confidence.

“There’s no way you can get away, not on a pipsqueak of a scooter like that. We’ll give you five seconds at most.”

Mayumi wheeled the scooter around and pressed the starter button. She twisted the throttle, utterly calm, cool and collected. The little engine howled like a banshee. The scooter leapt away in a cloud of exhaust.

These men were one of at least fifty biker gangs in Shinjuku, who won their status carving up territories in the high-risk areas. But even among them, the ones who chose to go out at night could be counted on the fingers of one hand: *Preying Mantises*, *Magnum Force*, *Bloodsucking Leeches*, *Vulcan Express*, *Tarantulas*.

They were all so bad there was no telling which was the worst of the bunch. The members were between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. A bunch of overgrown kids, the ferocity of whose temper tantrums knew no moral constraints.

Mayumi had permitted herself a premature sigh of relief when she heard the thunderous roar of the engines behind her, followed by wild shouts. In five seconds they’d pulled alongside her.

Their black leather-clad hands reached out to seize her shoulders and grab at her breasts. Mayumi bent backwards away from the crushing, grabbing hands. Not so much foreplay as a prelude to drawing and quartering.

Gritting her teeth, she cranked the handlebars hard to the right, hoping to drive the bike on her right into the shutters of a fruit stand.

The man’s hand fell away as she wrestled to balance the bike. Another sensation rose up from her waist. The man on the left had his hand in her lap. She pounded on him with her right hand. He didn’t budge.

She glanced to the right. A young man wearing a black helmet, gloves and T-shirt. She could well imagine the vulgar glint in his eyes shining beneath the tinted visor. Those practiced fingers proved persistent, burrowing between her crotch and the seat.

Mayumi plunged into the shopping arcade on her left and grazed one of the pillars holding up the roof close enough to feel the painted steel brush against her cheek. At the last second, the hand slipped away.

The raw sensations surged from her nether regions. Hands pawed at breasts. A hot, wet fever brimmed in her eyes. But she raced on, unable to begin to imagine what fate awaited her at the end of the darkness.

Chapter Three

When he passed through the air at high speed, the darkness seemed to congeal and grow hard. There was pleasure in the darkness itself, an empathetic longing called forth from the memory of his genes. The blood thrummed against his eardrums.

This is our home, this eternally dense darkness. You will transfigure within it, evolve and become invincible. The demon realms will yield to you. We understand. I am your muscle and bone, your organs, your cells, your genes.

Anticipation, assent, acclamation made his heart soar, pushed the substances of his hemoglobin to their limits.

But like the roar of the raging tide, the jubilation crested and began to recede. He saw a faint light in the distance and knew what it was. It turned into dreams and nightmares suffused with a rose-tinted glory.

The bloody loathing and anger bathed his face, and yet he could not but see the beauty. Were any to deny it to his face, he would surely slaughter them on the spot.

For it was the comeliness of a young man's face. *Fear not, commanded that part of him lurking within. You will soon equal him, surpass him, and leave him far behind. Do not doubt the power of the darkness.*

He understood that as well. He had tasted defeat once. His fighting skills would continue to improve apart from any effort on his part. Without a doubt, he would triumph over the beautiful young man in front of him.

But however his head and heart were convinced of victory, lurking deep down inside him, in the dark abyss, where even his consciousness did not dare to venture, the doubters murmured their discontent.

However his overweening conviction and self-confidence told him he would, *pride goeth before a fall*. For defeat had once stared him in the face.

No, he cried, his very existence cried. *No, no, no.*

The realization dawned on him that the voice drumming against his earlobes was his own. He sprang up, bathed in sweat.

The smell of the earth reached his senses first. Then the stillness permeating his flesh and bones. A long sigh escaped his lips. He was lying on the mound of dirt in the middle of the underground parking garage.

He cast his eyes down to the foot of the dirt mountain. Crouching there in the charcoal black until he called for him, forever if that was how long it took—

“Hyota,” he said.

The dark mass nodded. “You have slept a restless sleep.”

“The earth is beginning to fade. How goes our dwelling?” Gento Roran said in black tones.

“The ground is being excavated as we speak. We must take care to make sure that Aki-sama does not notice.”

“He will notice eventually,” Gento said, wrapping a coat around him. “He knows this place inside and out, a veritable prince of the city. We cannot allow him to deceive us forever. This mere earth is cold comfort. I require a fundamental sense of security.”

“You speak the truth. But I beg you to persevere for another few days.”

“Another few days could prove fatal. The Sanbo Group assassins have proved as incompetent as those from the Shiragi Syndicate.”

“Yes. Those killer cyborgs were said to be the best of the lot, but not compared to Aki-sama. One seems to have escaped with his life—or rather his brain—intact.”

“I’m sure you are pleased, Hyota. And no wonder. You’ve doted on him since the day he was born.”

“I was only doing my duty. But I have not tipped the scales in any case.”

“I understand,” Gento said with a wry smile. “What of the assassins from Kurusu Real Estate?”

“They’re called the Munakata Brothers. But in all honesty, when it comes to the likes of them, perhaps—”

“*Perhaps* won’t do. It looks like I’m going to have to do the deciding myself.”

Gento climbed down from the mountain of dirt. “I’ll be going,” he said, setting off at a brisk clip that was all the more remarkable considering the fearful threads strung hither and yon, that had sliced and diced that fiendish snake.

“I shall accompany you.”

“That’s okay. Your responsibility is the restoration of my abode.”

Hyota bowed. Gento proceeded through the darkness. All around him flickered dots of red and green light, the eyes of the gremlins and goblins lurking just beyond the curtains of black. They peered suspiciously at the carefree Gento while clearing out of the way, creeping up bit by bit as the darkness closed in behind him.

The ceiling in front of him hung down at a crazy angle. An avalanche of debris spilled down from a giant fissure. In front of it was the wrecked door of what appeared to be an elevator. A gap had opened up between the twisted frame and the wall.

Gento melted into a space that the average person could not hope to fit even twisting and contorting his body. There wasn't an elevator car in the shaft, only the rectangular abyss. Without a second thought, Gento stepped into what looked like a conduit straight down to hell.

He didn't fall.

Gento Roran floated there above this pit of Hades. He reached toward the heavens with his right hand and silently glided upwards. High above his head appeared a spot of sunlight. Gento soared like an angel of death abandoning the night in search of the sun.

Ten minutes later, he was mingling among the pedestrian traffic on Hanazono Avenue headed towards the Koshu Highway.

The light unfolding in the dim gloom condensed into a single line. Without a sound, and with a breath of wind, the terrifying skills exhibited therein were known only to the person wielding them.

The results were less than satisfactory. A slight frown creased his lips. A slight shadow crossed his nonchalant face, as if normally disturbed by nothing more severe than a spring breeze.

With a casual swivel of his wrist, the line of light split the darkness and was drawn back to his hand as the black-clad figure reeled back his devil wires.

Setsura Aki sat on the edge of the bed and scowled. The upper half of a human body sat on the table ten feet in front of him, casting off a glossy light. It was a mannequin, in the slender shape of a woman.

Adding to the oddness of the scene was the big bowl sitting beneath the stand supporting her. The faint sunlight reflected off what appeared to be the watery surface of the mannequin. Looking closer, though, the details became clearer.

An oily liquid covered her from the head down to the breasts, dripping down into the bowl like melting snow off a roof.

"As I expected," Setsura grumbled. "Won't cut through it. I'll have to go with a sharper wire, though any finer a gauge and I'll end up slicing my own hands." Setsura looked at the mannequin. "I'll have to change the way it cuts."

He flexed the back of his hand downward and flicked out his index finger. A thin beam of light sprang out. To ordinary eyes, the source of this flash of light would have remained a mystery.

The titanium-steel thread flew through the air and coiled around the right shoulder of the mannequin, stretched across the back to the left armpit, and wrapped three times around the ribcage beneath the breasts.

A terrible fate awaited the mannequin. Except—as Setsura tugged with his right hand, the feedback through the wire did not communicate

a momentary tautness, but quickly unwound under the tension.

The oil coating the mannequin defending it against the genie's wires was the same as that secreted by Hyota's body. Setsura had it analyzed and synthesized at the Shinjuku Chemical Research and Development Laboratory.

"What the hell is this stuff?" said the head staff researcher, examining the sample Setsura presented to them. "It's not animal fat. It contains none of the glycerin molecules found in all oils. It's hardly even a liquid. How in the world did you discover such a substance?"

"I didn't exactly *discover* it," Setsura said airily. He couldn't exactly explain that this was the one substance his devil wires couldn't sever without getting put under the microscope himself.

Not knowing what it was didn't stop them from synthesizing it. He borrowed a mannequin from a dress shop whose owner he knew and coated it with the stuff. He'd now spent the last three hours trying to penetrate it with his devil wires.

He was now zero for three thousand tries. He had to admit he was impressed. Hyota must have studied his technique and modified his physiology accordingly. It was time to lay all their cards on the table.

"I guess it was inevitable," Setsura said, pulling a large suitcase out from under the bed. He placed it on the mattress, released the latch, and took out a small metal box, six inches by four inches by three inches deep.

He replaced the suitcase and sat down in the chair at the table. The box didn't appear to have a lock. He placed his fingers on the smooth metal surface and with an almost imperceptible motion twisted them clockwise.

The lid slipped slightly to the right revealing a keyhole invisible to the naked eye, into which he inserted a strand of devil wire—though no one could have otherwise detected that that was what he was doing.

Then—he did nothing, nothing to the box or the lid.

The pinky of his right hand transformed into a living thing, into a thing of delicate beauty. The source soon became apparent, from the brilliant swarm oozing out of the narrow opening. Ensnared by the devil wires, the squirming movements were being made by the world's prettiest bees.

Though each was no more than an eighth of an inch long, Setsura alone knew how deadly they could be.

With lifespans of three hundred years, and stingers that could penetrate alloy steel—made of the same compounds as Setsura's devil wires—the constantly replenished toxins released could corrode even mechanical devices.

These "guard bees" protected this box that had been passed down through generations of the Aki clan.

With a nod of apology to the captives of his devil wires, Setsura

removed the contents of the box: a pair of tweezers so fine the ends appeared to dissolve into the air; a grinding wheel about an inch in diameter attached to a motor the same size; and a magnifying loupe, the most practical-looking item in the bunch.

He screwed the loupe into his right eye, picked up the tweezers with his right hand, and engaged the tiny switch of the motor with his left pinky.

A faint low hum filled the room. Setsura brought the tips of the tweezers close to the grinding wheel, spinning so fast its contours dissolved into an opaque blur.

Behind the lens of the loupe, his normally lackadaisical black eyes shone with an unexpectedly earnest light. With the tips of the tweezers—practically invisible to the naked eye—he touched the even finer tip of the wire against the wheel, scattering a shower of small sparks into the air.

A burst of warmth in that dimly-lit world, though the coolly utilitarian purpose here was to sharpen the killing edge of these devilish wires and hone the sub-micron strands to a narrower width. All the better to kill with.

Several minutes later, Setsura raised his head. A knock came at the door. This was his safe house. Nobody should know he was here, let alone at home. Unperturbed, he placed the loupe on the table and leaving the sharpening equipment where it was, went to the door.

The knock came again, a signal of some sort. Setsura put his hand on the knob and opened the door. Standing there was a middle-aged woman wearing round, black-rim glasses.

“Excuse me,” she said and pushed back Setsura and strode into the room with an unapologetic, overbearing manner.

She was wearing a bargain-basement white knit polo shirt and a long linen skirt. Her perm was peppered with dandruff. She was holding an equally cheap handbag in her right hand. Her presence in the genie’s dusky hideaway was profoundly surreal.

“Man, it’s hot,” she said, wiping her face with a rumpled handkerchief. She pulled over the chair and sat down. The springs groaned beneath her yard-wide ass. She stood five foot two and had a circumference at her bust and hips to match.

With an ill-tempered glance at Setsura, she said, “What a pain in the neck you are. Yesterday I broke two hundred ten pounds. Damn, I’m fagged.” In the neck of the woods she came from, that meant she was tired. “I gotta pack lunches for my kids. First thing in the morning and all—”

“Morning? What time is it?” Setsura asked, interrupting the chattering hippo next to him.

“Sakes alive! Can’t keep track of the time, neither? It’s ten after five.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, you’re the one asking for favors, remember. You got anything cold to drink around here?”

“Sink’s back there.”

With an exasperated groan, the fat lady reached her fat hand into the handbag and took out a Sony ST2 digital projector. The ST1 model had been released the year before, delivering the same “look and feel” as an IMAX screen to home theater devotees. The ST2 reduced the size to that of a tablet computer.

“This was delivered by bike courier this morning. I already checked it for explosives and the like.” She wiped her forehead. When she sat down, every part of her body from her chin to her belly folded on top of itself like a melting swirl of soft ice cream.

She set the projector on the table. “Shit, I’m outta here. I swear, first time I’ve been in somebody’s place and nobody offered me even a cup of tea.”

She grunted and was about to move her fat ass toward the door when Setsura said, “So what of that job I gave you?”

“Oh, you mean that coffin business?” She turned and stared up at the ceiling. “What with this second reconstruction effort, there’s ground getting dug up all over the place. Intel is sparse. They’re disguising their moves or using third parties. You know, put some salaryman types into a hypnotic state so they think they’re commuting to work when they’re really digging holes in the ground. The Roran clan could pull off something like that before breakfast, no less than you.”

“Yeah, that does figure. Well, keep looking.”

“Don’t need to ask twice,” she said, and left.



More startling than the strange appearance of Yoshiko Toya, the best information broker in Shinjuku, was that she should appear at Setsura's safe house without fear of being tailed, and blithely go on her way without the slightest concern.

Her ample backside disappeared into the gloomy hallway. He turned his attention to the projector and focused the lens on the corner opposite.



With a faint humming sound, a three-foot square lit up the gray walls. At first the image appeared as a tangle of human shadows. The auto-focus kicked in and it pulled into sharper view, revealing the true vulgarity of the torrid scene of sexual congress—

A shapely woman on her hands and knees, two men going at her from the back and the front, tanned torsos affixed to her mouth and crotch, thrusting back and forth as if to wring all the pleasure out of her.

Perhaps one of the men's personal fetishes, the woman was wearing nothing but a T-shirt. The T-shirt was rolled up. A man's hairy arms reached from her waist to grab her breasts, rolling her erect nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

Reflecting the flood of sensations, her hips began to move as well. The camera looked down at her hips from the left. The glistening and translucent layer of flesh covering the taut, throbbing muscles was pockmarked with red hickeys and teeth marks, suggesting he'd gone after her with his mouth before penetrating her.

The man drove into her relentlessly. Her ass took on a life of its own, greedily drawing him in deeper. The sound of ass slapping against thighs, the sound of a damp, engorged rod driving into and out of the sultry bog.

The woman's muffled voice grew louder. Penetrated in her mouth as well, her labored gasps were reduced to stifled moans, slurping on him like a melting lollipop.

The men's faces were out of view.

The fiercely turgid state of their flesh and bone wasn't created by drugs, but according to the rigorous training of their natural endowments. The power wound tightly within was said to equal that of any heavyweight wrestler. Their perspiring pectorals and deltoids, thigh and gluteus maximus muscles were the tools given men to subjugate women.

Whether it was the cameraman or whether it was remote control, the image slowly swiveled and closed in on the woman's face.

Setsura scratched his head. He could have guessed the rest.

Her mouth opened wide to take in his whole width and length, her cheeks drawing in and out in a trance, a sloppy wet slurping sound as he pumped himself into her. Her face was flushed, her body pink with arousal, surrendering all her inhibitions to the onslaught of cruel pleasures.

"Put your teeth into it," came the scornful voice of the man above her. She complied, baring her pretty white teeth against the tip of his shaft.

The man shoved himself against her. She attacked him with her teeth and slathered him with her tongue, that lovely face waiting to be defiled while she lost herself in the rhapsodic heights of the defilement.

The man picked up the pace and approached the summit. The woman's voice moaned under the lash of such vulgar torture. She shook her face and shook her ass. Sweat flew.

The man groaned and seized her face and buried himself inside her. Her hips trembled and shuddered. The come filled her mouth. She choked, her throat throbbed, the raw sound of swallowing.

The man pushed her face back, the sucking pop followed by the white thread of come strung between his moist shaft and her lips. Her countenance contorted with pleasure and pain, the foul fluids slathered across her mouth painting a look of extraordinary erotic lewdness.

The hairy hand pulled her closer again. She reached out with her tongue to lick off what remained. Instead he wiped himself off on her cheeks and brows. She rubbed her face against his brush until her skin glistened with sweat and come.

She arched her back and threw back her head, her body shivering with sadomasochistic satisfaction wrenched unwillingly out of her. Setsura didn't need to see her face. This was the girl who should have left Shinjuku by now, his secretary, Mina Chiaki.

***Part Seven: The Munakata
Brothers***

Chapter One

The day was hot and humid enough already. When the torrid wind kicked up the fine dust in small whirlwinds, it made a man regret having gotten up that morning.

Theologians and psychics and necromancers had all reached a consensus that the entirety of Shinjuku was wrapped in a demonic miasma, as if trapped beneath a bell jar.

A research team studying supernatural and psychological phenomena made up of scientists from Great Britain, the U.S. and The Netherlands had determined that distortions in this dome of ghostly auras covering Shinjuku arose from irregularities in the line drawn by the fissure at the epicenter of the Devil Quake.

The crown of that dome was measured at exactly 7.94 meters south-south west from the Shinto gate on the grounds of Nukebenten in Yochomachi, at an altitude of 666.66 meters.

The seven-thousand page final report to the mayor of Shinjuku and the prime minister concluded that the dome was composed of parapsychological elements that current scientific methods were at a loss to explain.

In particular frustrating the ability of criminologists and psychologists to analyze and comprehend were the outbreak of heinous crimes in Shinjuku; the violent alterations of personality; the appearance of strange life forms that could not be accounted to the mutations of a few genetic specimens; the observed devolution of human physiology; and many more examples.

They were forced to conclude that unknown factors trapped beneath the dome were inexorably accelerating the violent nature of all organic and inorganic things. It was, the report stated, something other than the simple manifestation of malice that every piece of matter emitted in some form.

According to a “pseudoscience analyzer,” a remarkable recent achievement in the field of parapsychology, these factors derived from still extant supernatural phenomena in the past and were not the product of the natural world or natural processes. Call them malevolent elements, or “these dark materials.”

This darkness existed, the report went on, but could not be properly investigated, spontaneously appearing as it did from outside of the

moral realms. At the same time, the selective mental and physical destruction directed at the human world seemed to arise out of an active will.

Who or *what* was at the root of this will was anybody's guess.

As if insisting that the supernatural phenomena appearing here and there in the human realm must remain mysteries, and would go unsolved forever. But if by chance that will acted against the human world, no matter how well-intentioned it might be, human beings must annihilate it.

Unfortunately, the report concluded pessimistically, that would probably be impossible. Even now, people were hardly willing to accept that this demonic zone existed, despite Shinjuku's undeniable existence.

And the fact that it influenced even the laws of science. During the summer, Shinjuku's average temperature was three degrees Celsius higher than the twenty-two other wards in Tokyo, and two degrees lower in the winter. Yet every year, people froze to death in the middle of the broiling summer and puddles froze over.

Beginning with the Government Freezer, the sunlight streaming down on the city brought about all sorts of strange phenomena. In an extreme case, the profusion of plant life in one neighborhood would completely change from week to week.

As if afraid of the sun, stalks drooped, petals closed. The next day, brown splotches discolored the green stems, the white flowers tinged with red.

Two days later, the listless light filling the magical streets brought forth from the earth flowers with brown stems and crimson petals, scattering their pollen on the wind. One night in Totsuka, over seven hundred people succumbed in ecstasy to the bloodsucking flowers blooming inside them.

That was hardly the end of it. Even stranger were those who didn't die and lived on, while cultivating the white and purple flowers sprouting from their ears and mouth. The biological designation of these literal "flower children"—flora or fauna—was a matter of vigorous debate.

This was but one of the strange phenomena in this city that made a hot day all the hotter. At high noon, the stirred-up dust dug into the skin like birdshot and left burns behind.

So it might be comforting to know that a fall-down drunk could be lured to sleep by the cool embrace of the earth in the arms of those who cared for him. A place like the grounds of the former Suwa Shrine in Takada no Baba.

The faded red *torii* gates, almost lost in the dusty clouds of earthen yellow, rose above the ruined steps. Beyond it squatted the skeletal remains of the shrine office.

Setsura Aki brushed away the hot grit stinging his cheeks, not so

much sand as small stones.

It was eleven in the morning, the time of day when the hot winds blew the hardest. The time and the place indicated by his foes—but that wasn't what weighed on his mind. There was no point trying to guess which way a fight would go in this city. A grade school student could come up with ten more alternatives on the spot.

The enemy hadn't placed any restriction on the kind of heat he could bring to this fight. All they needed was Mina as a bargaining chip.

Setsura stared up at the sky, at the oppressive, lead-colored sea of clouds. He stood there, his back turned to the wind, the hems of his slicker and his long hair fluttering impatiently.

"Yeah, pretty as a picture as always," came an amiable voice behind him.

Setsura didn't move. His eyes watched the two figures mounting the steps in front of him. One was a naked woman. Mina. The other was wearing a leather vest and jeans. He was about five-eleven, the same height as Setsura, though as the video made clear, he was a big enough man to fit another Setsura inside him.

Mina had a dog collar wrapped around her neck. The big man behind her was holding the leash. He had nothing in his other hand.

"Don't go forgetting me behind you," came the friendly warning.

"I don't believe we've met before, Aki?" The voice this time was laced with menace. "Rumors have reached our ears of your strange talents. The boss warned us to be careful around you. But we can hardly walk away from the golden opportunity to see you in action, now can we?"

"Let go of my secretary," Setsura said in a tired voice.

Mina bowed her back and bared her throat with a strangled gasp as the man jerked on the leash. "Yeah, to the pretty boys go the spoils, eh? Never fucked a girl as fine as her before. Man, there's nothing hotter than an amateur sticking her ass out for you like a pro."

"Forgive my brother's coarseness," apologized the man behind him, in a manner that suggested he was totally sincere. "Let her go."

"If you say so. But wait just a sec."

The big man grabbed Mina around the waist and pulled her toward him. Lacking any other support, she bent forward. A groan escaped her pale lips. He thrust his hips against her buttocks.

"Rumors are all I've heard of the Munakata Brothers as well, but a man who'd use a woman as a shield tells me all I need to know."

"So you say." He licked his thick lips. "But I'll be finished soon enough."

Of the criminal organizations that had partitioned Shinjuku into thirds, these were the murderous siblings who worked exclusively for Kurusu Real Estate.

Anywhere between a hundred and a thousand professional assassins

had set up shop in Shinjuku, their services for sale in the black market *Register*. The singular exceptions were these two.

In the beginning, all anybody knew was that they were related. Not even their sexes were certain, or their ages or full names. Even after going on retainer and being generally recognized as the best in the business, not even their boss had seen their faces with his own two eyes.

The *Register* contained a “placeholder” entry. According to it, the year before, the brothers had carried out between twenty-seven and thirty hits, grossing some 350 million yen. At ten million per job, these were extraordinary rates for a pair of freelancers who weren’t actually made men.

“Come to think about it, today is the deadline for updating the *Register*,” Setsura said, casting a cool look at his accosted secretary. “I wonder who will top the listings, or whether the Munakata Brothers will be listed at all—now that you have met *me*.”

The big man had started to smile. The smile froze on his face. The young man in front of him had turned into something *else*.

Ice raced through the veins, nerves conveyed the speed of the darkness, its will ruling over the senses. Hell itself must burnish the face of beauty. Setsura’s countenance had transfigured, like the incarnation of the Hindu devil Rakshasa.

The big man groaned, his fingers clutching at Mina’s ass as he erupted inside her. A moment later, a crimson line ringed his neck, Setsura’s skills being such that not a drop of blood spilled. His body still shuddering in the throes of orgasm, the head slid off his shoulders and thumped to the ground.

Setsura hadn’t moved. Feeling no response from the devil wire flung out behind him could only mean that move had been anticipated.

The curtains of dust wrapped around him. Perhaps that voice had been the work of a ventriloquist. It hadn’t been that of the big man. The resemblances were there, but also the clear differences.

The other brother was hiding somewhere on the grounds of the shrine. He’d hedged his bets and made Setsura show his hand, while Setsura had to guess at his foe’s next move.

Though when it came to delivering the *coup de grâce*, their methods were utterly unimaginative: a knife to the heart or a bullet to the brain, or some variation on those two themes.

The one entirely predictable constant in their *modus operandi* was that the victim was always hit from behind. Peculiar from the perspective of the criminal element from outside Shinjuku, perhaps, but a Demon City hit man always had a style of his own.

In particular, the freelancers not attached to an organization were a creative bunch, though one critical variable in this equation was that their targets were citizens of Shinjuku as well.

Weapons and defensive methods and materials developed in the

outside world inevitably arrived in Shinjuku a month before they reached the markets anywhere else.

Some reports claimed that military procurement officers and weapons manufacturers made sure the shipments got through in order to test equipment in a live-fire environment. A good thirty percent of the approximate 150,000 “incidents of criminal activity” recorded each year could be attributed to street fighting, making it the ideal arena for simulating urban warfare.

The major organized crime associations aside, for small and mid-sized gangs and yakuza outfits, how fast they could acquire these weapons spelled the difference between life and death.

In other words, it was hardly rare for a bunch of street toughs to be armed with RPGs and missile launchers. And all this proceeded hand in hand with defensive measures.

Early bulletproof vests made to stop Magnum and Teflon-coated bullets were replaced by glass and composite carbon fiber ballistic vests, which were in turn supplanted by liquid body armor developed by the U.S. Army. Nowadays, external armor was being enhanced by pain suppressants and drugs that increased muscle strength and density, creating a kind of naturally-secreted protective shield.

A man willing to risk side effects such as a shortened life span, brain damage, and paralysis could escape a car bomb—from inside the car and engulfed in flames—and live to tell the tale.

In Shinjuku, what it took to kill a man required measures commensurate with the environment of Demon City. And so it followed that every professional killer had no choice but to develop his own unique style.

More than weaponry, an eye for an opponent’s weak spot. More than the way he killed, the way he got close. Some studied magic and killed with curses, while others employed remote viewing and hypnotism. Some sported a thousand faces while others could change sexes at will.

Stabbing a man in the back was the easy part. Getting close enough to make it count was another matter entirely.

No hit man with a reputation worth keeping would divulge his tricks of the trade to anybody else, not so much fearing he’d be out of a job as ending up being given a dose of his own medicine.

When it came to following the rules, the Munakata Brothers were old school all the way.

How would they come at him from behind? Setsura stood there silently. His hand hung by his side. Thousands of devil wires spilled from his sleeves. With a keenness of touch on a par with his eyesight, he felt what they found as they crept along the ground.

The wind blew at ten feet a second. There was nothing dangerous in the dust and sand. Nothing lurked behind the *torii* gates or was hiding in the bushes. Nobody at all was on the grounds, except Mina.

Setsura strolled over to where she was lying face down, gasping for breath. Stepping onto the grounds of the shrine, he sensed no signs of life from the strand of devil wire wrapped around the neck of the big man.

His foe must have fled.

Next to the corpse, Mina looked up at him with a faint smile. "I really did intend to get away, but before I could get to the bridge—"

Setsura undid the buttons of his slicker, but Mina held out her hand. "I'm fine as is," she said, getting to her feet on her own. The hickeys and teeth marks covering her skin flashed in the dusty sunlight. "The day I need a helping hand is the day I retire."

Making no attempt to cover up, she started walking. Setsura was halfway between the big man's body and his secretary. He started after her, leaving the body on the ground behind him, when a gust of wind struck his back.

Setsura turned in a graceful spin. His back was now to Mina.

His secretary's face transfigured in that second. Her brows hiked up, her eyes grew wide and wild, forming the mien of a demoness. Her arms reached for Setsura's neck, and then stopped in midair, as if restrained by unseen hands.

Setsura didn't move. The quiet eyes of the *senbei* shop owner were drawn to the body on the ground.

The naked woman frozen in the act of leaping at him—the young man dressed in black in this sultry season—the lifeless corpse—all bathed in the milky sunlight and colored by the yellow dust.

For a long moment, this surreal scene arrested the flow of time itself.

"What do you say?" Setsura asked the headless man lying on the ground. The look in his eyes and the tone of his voice were such that he could just as well be addressing a friend. "Won't you come out and play? You're just going to leave me like this? I don't much care to leave empty handed myself. That was a good move, making me turn my back to you by getting my own secretary to attack me. But I have eyes everywhere. Well? I can't imagine it'll reflect well on your reputation if you don't at least give it the old college try. To say nothing of your employer."

The dust swirled around the dead face. When it cleared a second later, it was another creature entirely. The corpse aroused itself with remarkable force and charged at Setsura in a swirl of wind.

Setsura stepped to the side like a matador as the big man stampeded past him. At the same time, his body parted vertically and then horizontally. This time, Setsura paid no attention to the mist of the blood and the scattering body parts. Rather, he focused on the small shadow springing up from inside it.

A human being no bigger than a three or four year old. Drenched by the big man's bodily fluids, metallic luster glimmered inside the little hand.

Large black wings wrapped around Setsura, the hems and tails of the slicker. Accompanied by the bark of the automatic handgun, the ejected shell casings glittered in the sunlight as the bullets pockmarked the fabric.

Trailing a thin line of blue gun smoke, a dwarf with the face of an adult landed on the ground a dozen feet away.

“But of course. The Munakata Brothers finally reveal themselves.”

The low voice drifted out from the shadow of the slicker. The dwarf’s eyes widened with surprise. There could be nowhere to hide from the impact of the silenced 9 mm armor piercing rounds that could punch through two inches of steel. Even a flesh wound should kill, when the explosive tips would fragment into thousands of shards.

Setsura said, his voice as cool as a winter’s night, “The brothers—a small thing in a big, human-shaped package. I’ll treasure the holes in my coat as souvenirs of our encounter.”

By the time he had folded those black wings around him, the dwarf standing there had been drawn and quartered, the severed body parts strewn across the dusty earth.

“I could undo the spell myself, but Mephisto’s the specialist in that department. I suppose it’s about time I sent you on a paid vacation.”

So spoke the genie in tones any listener would find more than a tad hair-raising as he tossed Mina over his shoulder, the demonic visage still etched on her face by the hypnotic spell.

“Hey, mister, you need a ride?” rang out a woman’s voice.

From beyond the *torii* gates, at the foot of the stone steps, came the heavy rumble of an engine. A car with tires the size of steel drums bounded up the steps. The windshield wrapped around the driver’s seat and the passenger’s compartment, while the eight cylinder engine was exposed. Pipes coiled like thick snakes down from the manifold and along the frame to the bull horn exhaust stack in the rear, belching clouds of purple smoke.

Excepting the driver’s seat, the chassis itself hung lower than the tops of the tires. This was a “street legal” off-road buggy all the rage these days.

The engine roaring, it came to a stop alongside Setsura. The sheet metal door opened and a pair of shapely tanned thighs swung out, followed by the splendid physique of a young woman with short-cut hair and thin wrap-around sunglasses.

She stood in front of Setsura, blocking the wind. She was wearing blue hot pants. A bikini top the same color tightly contained her ample breasts. The kind of outfit that made a man want to rip it off.

The wardrobe aside, the eyes hidden behind the dark lenses and the way she carried herself said she was something other than a regular member of society.

“Even in Shinjuku, toss a naked girl into a taxi and the next stop will

probably be the cops.” She looked up at Setsura, not a little entranced by his visage. “You can count on me, though.”

“What, you just happened to pass by?” Setsura said, showing no interest as he walked away. “You’ve been watching the whole time.”

“You knew? But you never looked my way.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got eyes everywhere,” he said, the temperament of the *senbei* shop owner returning.

“Hold on,” she said with more urgency. “You’re Setsura Aki, right?”

Setsura stopped and turned around. “How do you know my name?”

“I’m looking for my brother. Hey, perfect timing, us crossing paths like this. He came here to get an interview with you. You’ve met him, right?”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Sasaki. Freelances for *Historical World*. I’m his little sister. Name’s Azusa.”

“Sasaki-san,” Setsura repeated to himself. “I met him in Shinjuku Gardens the other night. We talked for half an hour or so. That’s all.”

The *senbei* shop owner wasn’t eager to be the bearer of bad news. The girl was too young to learn about death the hard way.

But she didn’t think so. “You mean, he’s dead?”

“Well—”

“Fine,” Azusa said. He couldn’t tell from her expression if she was sad or relieved. “My brother had no business getting involved in whatever business you’re in. And certainly not in this city. He did have a lead or two. You interested?”

“Maybe later,” Setsura said coolly, and started walking again.

He’d descended from the grounds of the shrine when the rumble of the engine pulled up next to him again.

“Hey, want a ride?”

“I don’t have the fare,” he said, not turning around. The occasional passerby apparently saw nothing unusual about a man walking with a naked woman flung across his shoulder.

“I’m not a cabbie. Just wanted to find out about my brother and sell a little intel.”

Her voice trailed a step behind Setsura, awfully chipper for having just learned of her brother’s death. A strange girl.

Setsura raised his left hand. A taxi approached the curb. The engine of the street buggy snarled, jabbing its nose menacingly at the taxi. Behind the windshield, the cabbie snarled back and yanked hard on the steering wheel.

The brakes squealed and the cab stopped by the sidewalk ahead of them. The door swung violently open and the barrel-chested cabbie leaned out and bared his yellow teeth. “You crazy, lady? Quit poaching my turf!”

As if waiting for this moment, the buggy’s door swung up and down.

“Put a sock in it, fatso!” she shot back. “You blind or something? Get yourself a pair of glasses! No easy mark for you here. What, you looking for a little corrective surgery or something?”

She growled out that last challenge with an unnerving calmness that only pissed off the cabbie all the more.

“I’m gonna wring that bitch’s neck.” His sleeve rolled up, showing his bulging bicep, he cracked his knuckles as he strode towards her.

“Bring it on, bub.”

It was hard to tell whether the cabbie stopped before her voice reached him or the report from the gun did. The heavy crack of the large-caliber revolver was followed by flying chunks of asphalt.

The cabbie yelped, and amidst the spouting flame and booming echoes did a crazy little dance there on the spot.

The noise suddenly ceased. The smoking muzzle of the gun drew a bead on the center of the sweating man’s ugly face. The gun was a .44 Magnum Smith & Wesson Model 29. Weighing almost three pounds, the average man would need both hands to hold it level. Azusa was using one hand and it wasn’t trembling in the slightest.



The first assumption was that she was on some sort of roids. In any case, a girl who'd pull a .44 Magnum to ward off a bit of harmless road rage had a personality profile way out of the norm.

“One shot left.” Azusa licked her lips and flashed a bright smile. “Wring away. If you feel lucky. I’m a lousy shot, you know. My, my, my, I was aiming at your heart the whole time. Who knows where the next one will land?”

From the rock-hard steadiness of her arm, probably right between the eyes.

The cabbie backed away slowly, holding up one hand as a sign of surrender. He tried to return her look with an equal one of nonchalance, but still looked scared shitless. The sweat turned his shirt into a sheet of sticky cellophane covering his chubby chest and paunchy belly.

He backed into the door of his cab, and then with a speed that belied his flabby frame, ducked into the car and started the engine before the door had closed behind him.

Two engines kicked into gear. The taxi had turned into the center of the street when the buggy rear-ended it. Setsura watched with blank surprise as the taxi slid sideways onto the sidewalk and into a telephone pole.

If a car could saunter along with a self-satisfied grin, that’s what the buggy was doing as it pulled up next to Setsura. “Well, it looks like the taxi can’t make it. How about a ride?”

Taking in both the girl’s pretty face, unmarred by even a speck of guilt or evil, and the cabbie crawling out of the wrecked car, Setsura Aki shrugged and nodded.

Chapter Two

Mayumi sensed the door opening. Turn around and she could see who was coming through the door. But she lacked the energy to do so.

She was in a room in a big warehouse. Though it dated back to before the Devil Quake, it didn't appear to have suffered much structural damage. The high ceilings and walls were spackled with filling compound that covered up the cracks.

An oily smell hung in the air. Not so much from it being stored somewhere but rather from having soaked into the joists and beams.

Mayumi's hands were handcuffed behind her, and the handcuffs were attached to a ring around a steel post with another pair of handcuffs. She saw no way of easily freeing herself, and was not in the mood to try.

The late afternoon light streaking through the window next to her painted long shadows on the concrete floor. Through the window and walls came the sound of footsteps and voices of men. Bad men. They were men, and that made them bad. That simple equation was all Mayumi needed to know.

She'd been snatched off Okubo Avenue the night before by this biker gang and violated in every orifice. The three of them had spent their wads and were probably off partying happy as clams.

A grating noise chased away the falling darkness. The steel shutters across the fifty-foot wide bay doors rolled up. Shadows like ghosts approached her through the slash of sunlight and solidified into the shapes of men.

The underboss of the gang that had kidnapped her along with several of his men, plus four others wearing dark suits.

One of the suits was a fat man in his fifties, but carrying the kind of fat that lent his presence additional psychological and not just physical weight. The rest, in their thirties, formed a line behind him. From the crisp line of the fat man's suit, he was the only one not packing heat.

The men formed a half-arc around Mayumi. The fat man, obviously the godfather of the bunch, said to the biker gang underboss, "This is the girl, eh?"

"Yeah," he answered, bowing repeatedly and subserviently. The balance of power was clear to anybody's eyes. "I couldn't hardly believe it myself. Three of our guys bit the dust in thirty seconds flat."

"Why the long face? Thanks to her, you won yourself a promotion to

boss of your little gang.”

“Well—I—” The underboss scratched his head in evident confusion.

“The problem is, how exactly do we know you’re telling the truth? Fuck her and die, you say? If that’s true, you deserve your reward.”

“Yes—that—” The underboss bowed again.

The godfather turned to one of the suits behind him and said with a greasy smile, “I happen to know a way. You—”

One of them nodded and melted back into the sunlight. He returned a minute later with another man. Mayumi aside, they all wore the same smile as the godfather.

“Shit! Feast your eyes on this!”

An abominable growl made Mayumi turn around before the words came out of the underboss’s mouth. She blanched with fear.

The man accompanying the suit was well over six feet tall. The growl issued from his parted thick lips—like a slit in a slab of fresh meat—revealing a set of yellow teeth and a dangling, rancid-colored tongue. From the swollen eyeballs and the dilated pupils, he was juiced on the hard stuff.

The hands and feet jutting out from the stained polo shirt and jeans were mottled and gray from the necrosis that attended habitual drug abuse. His legs bowed backwards from the knees down in the manner of the hind legs of a wild animal.

What froze the blood in Mayumi’s veins was the face, steadily transforming before her eyes. Not his expression. A black pelt was covering his skin, like that of a wolf or bear. In a flash the follicles sank into the skin and began to grow outwards.

“Surprised? He OD’d and fucked up his endocrine system. Can go from human to wolf man in five seconds flat. Brain’s in no better shape. Family gave up on him, sold him to us for pocket change. Not much good for anything, not even as a guard dog. Nobody will miss him when he’s gone. I’d say this would be the perfect way to ring his bell one last time.”

“Stop it.” Mayumi slowly shook her head, exhibiting a strength of resolve that would have made any other man withdraw the offer on the spot. “Stop it,” she said again.

Grinning faces filled her field of view. Wearing lewd smiles that turned them ugly and primitive, the suits and gangbangers alike were already close to slobbering at the prospect of a taboo sex show, practically trembling in anticipation.

“The two of you are going to do it,” the godfather proclaimed. “And we’re gonna watch. How you get it done is up to you. From the front, from the back, or with that pretty mouth of yours. But getting it done is the only way you’re walking out of here. *Comprende?*”

Mayumi remained silent in the face of such a cruel question. She would have nothing to say to anyone forever after this.

“What, your mouth stop working? Fine. Then we’ll let *him* choose.” The godfather jerked his chin toward the man-beast.

The man-beast crept toward her. His shirt bulged and rippled. The fur must cover his entire body by now. His black hands undid his fly and freed his rigid, engorged member, eight inches long and as dark as the rest of him.

He knelt in front of Mayumi and placed his hands on her hips and fixed her in his gaze, the red slits of his eyes alone radiating an all too human lust.

“Hoh. Wants to do you doggie style. Figures.” The godfather chuckled. He undid the handcuffs. “Go get her, pooch.”

Mayumi tried to scramble away. He tackled her by the legs, pinning her down as he tore off her clothing. Warm drool dripped onto her haunches. His fingers stabbed into her flesh like metal clamps, rendering her immobile.

He shoved hot and hard against her sex, penetrating her mercilessly and with overwhelming force. Mayumi screamed. The man-beast’s hips slammed against her ass. The muscles trembled.

The man-beast commenced his assault, and Mayumi felt a sensation melting through her lower torso she had never experienced before in her life. The man-beast’s cock stroked her like a fine paintbrush, filled her completely, massaging her soft, sensitive flesh with each thrust. At once vanishing and then driving at her again. The preternatural rhythm was driving her half-mad.

A wet, whimpering sound filled the empty warehouse. The beast-man leaned forward and seized Mayumi’s chin and pressed his mouth against hers.

One of the bikers shamelessly hurried around to get a better look.

Mayumi opened her mouth against his. His tongue and bodily fluids flowed in. The overpowering odor made her gag. The man-beast didn’t let up. His salivary glands must be as hopped up as his metabolism. His tongue swirled inside her mouth. A line of spittle trailed from her lips and across her cheek.

The gyrating motions shaking her from behind increased in speed and intensity. Mayumi screamed, the sounds forced out of her mouth by the burning pleasure.

The man-beast howled. He rammed himself home and poured his essence into her. The rest of the men moaned in a kind of sympathetic vibration.

The man-beast yanked himself free, a satisfied smile on the dumbly crazed countenance.

“Well?” the godfather said to the underboss.

“Soon.”

The eyes of the assembled men focused on Mayumi’s ass and the beast man. He lazily wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Nothing’s happening.” A growing edge of irritation punctuated the godfather’s statement.

“Another minute.” Sweat beaded on the underboss’s forehead.

The man-beast slowly came to his feet, pulled up his fly, and started toward the exit. The suit he’d come with chased after him.

“Hey.” He reached out to clap him on the shoulder. An odd sound rang out, followed by a hard thump and a spray of blood next to the godfather’s feet.

A man’s hand. The suit howled like a banshee. The shriek cut off like extinguishing a light. The suit crumpled to the floor, blood flowing from his wrist and neck. Next to him the man-beast raged, driven in some sort of *avant-garde* performance by his inner artistic demons.

Blood flew. Arms and feet slashed at the air. Not from any new victim, but erupting out of himself. The involuntary spasms of those in their death throes, known as St. Vitus’s dance or chorea, was known from time immemorial. But this was more a *Danse Macabre*.

Spraying blood from a thousand places, the man-beast charged amongst the dumbstruck humans. A frenzied swipe of a paw carved one biker’s face in half.

“Don’t shoot!” the godfather commanded his henchmen, even as they reached for their pieces. He grabbed the underboss by the collar and pushed him forward. “Hey! Want a piece of this? Come and get it!”

The head stuck out as if being thrust into the stock of a guillotine. Black lightning flashed through the air and ripped it off with no more difficulty than a freshly sharpened blade. The burly arm swept down at his head when the godfather jumped ten feet backwards with surprising nimbleness.

The man-beast reached his limit. A mist of blood enveloped his body. With one last cry, wheeling his arms and legs around, a moment later he collapsed to the ground, a bag of bones without a breath of life left in him.

The warehouse fell deathly silent.

“Looks like you were right, after all,” the godfather said to the now headless corpse of the underboss. He glanced at the man-beast and then Mayumi. “Fascinating. And this thing had the strength of a dozen tigers. What a prize you turned out to be.”

“So let’s hear about this information of yours.”

Setsura’s voice grew louder and then softer. Leaning against the post and rail fence, Azusa cast a dubious look at the young man in the swing. They were in a small park a block off of Shinjuku’s Kuyakusho Street.

It was built there eight years before as part of a “cultural” urban revitalization effort. Designating parks as a “culturally-enhanced environment” got people vested in the restoration and revitalization

effort far more than their own homes.

That creating these tiny, child-friendly oases of green should have so accelerated the restoration effort in Demon City, of all places, made the powers that be shake their heads in wonder at the dreadful irony of it all.

Setsura had left his secretary at Mephisto Hospital and then led Azusa Sasaki here.

Mephisto was on rounds, so he'd left her in the care of an old warhorse of a nurse, who'd assured him that any of the doctors there could treat Mina's hypnotic trance. She should already be on her way out of the city under heavy guard.

"You're a strange one," Azusa said with genuine surprise. "I get by picking up freelance writing and modeling jobs, like my brother. A guy with a face like yours, though, could be the prince of this city without lifting a finger. The competition's a motley crew compared to you. Give the biggest actress a wink and a nod, and she'd be spilling the beans in a red-hot second. So what's with this *senbei* shop business? And in a city like this?"

"Much appreciated," Setsura said, flashing his white teeth at her from the swing. Azusa couldn't help blushing like a schoolgirl. "No matter where you are, as long as it's not a ghost town, people are bound to be there."

Setsura's countenance faded away and then swung closer again. The sound of children playing could be heard in the distance, singing the nursery rhyme about the "Red Dragonfly."

"Men, women, old and young, as long as there are people, there will be happiness and sorrow, suffering and joy. Demon City can't change that. Many people here have lost something very important to them. Or have come here to leave it behind. Many eventually return to where they came from. Occasionally they come back. Because we can't truly leave anything behind. That's where I come in."

"Lost what? Important how?"

"Mostly what I look for is people."

"You're good at not making sense," Azusa said, rubbing her brows. "Didn't come here looking for a philosopher king. If you're joking, sure don't sound like it. Sitting there on that swing, I can't tell if you're up to something."

"I'll take that as a compliment too. However strange I am, I'm no more stranger than you. You don't seem the slightest bit curious about what happened to your brother."

"Knowing won't change what happened. There's plenty of action going on outside Shinjuku. No need for a blood 'n' guts war reporter to come here on purpose."

"In that case, the sooner you leave the better."

"You still don't want to know what I know?"

"You leave, and I'll be fine not knowing too."

"What a nice guy," she said with sardonic intent, though along with the gleam in her eyes as she looked at Setsura, it didn't quite come out that way. "So I'll give you this one on the house. It's about that seal thing."

Azusa gave Setsura an inquiring look. Setsura didn't react in the slightest, only swung closer and then farther away. She couldn't help noticing that although he did not appear to be exerting himself in the slightest, the swing of the pendulum didn't change.

"And how did you get hold of this information?"

"My brother didn't tell you? My boyfriend—not from around here—is a fellow in archeology at the National University Research Center. He ran across a report in a single volume in the archives that concerned you and yours."

"News to me."

"Not so much a report as a personal diary. At least that's what scholars like to call it, or so says my boyfriend. Whose diary do you think?"

"Like I would know."

"Guess. Here's a hint: professor, physician, author, priest, businessman, baker, and stationery store owner are all wrong."

"It's getting late."

"Okay, okay," Azusa said in an irritated voice. "The answer is: midwife."

"Now that you mention it, I was born at home, not in a hospital."

"Yeah, you and Gento Roran both."

"You don't say."

Like she was reciting poetry, Azusa said, "Setsura Aki was born on the thirteenth day of the month at three o'clock in the morning. Gento Roran was born the same year, the same month, the same day, exactly an hour later." She looked intently at Setsura, a strange light radiating from her eyes. "And the same midwife."

"That's news to me too. And how did that person's diary come to the attention of this boyfriend of yours?"

"There are businessmen who specialize in Demon City refuse. Seems that the book got thrown out with some old furniture and household goods during a year-end housecleaning. Along with everything else trucked out of Demon City, it ended up at the National University Research Center."

"I'm familiar with the business. So what does it say?"

"As they say, everything has its price."

"And I haven't got the money."

"You will do," Azusa said in a sultry voice. "Never laid eyes on a man as fine as you. A date and we'll call it even."

"That'd be fine with *me*, but it's not the sort of thing *I* would want to

do.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. How about we go directly to the source and ask that boyfriend of yours? I’m sure he would stipulate an altogether different set of conditions.”

“Another brush-off, eh?” Azusa raised her hands in mock surrender. “Fine. You don’t want to swap for the mystery of the feud between you and the Roran clan?”

“I believe that’s what your brother was after. But why would anybody care?”

“Who wouldn’t? It’s part and parcel of what gave birth to this city in the first place. Why is all the evil in the world gathering here? What if the answer to that question explains what makes your two families tick as well?”

“I think you’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

“Then what’s your explanation?”

“I haven’t got a clue.” In response to Azusa’s pout, he said, “I’m not kidding. I bet Gento’s as much in the dark as I am.”

Azusa pouted some more.

“It’s true that our two families have been at loggerheads for a while now. But why and to what end, I can’t say.”

“And yet you keep on fighting in the dark.”

“I guess that’s what it’s come to.”

“What a joke. Give me a fucking break.”

“Let’s say I do. What do you think the purpose behind all this is?”

“You having me on?” The pout returned, her face reflected in his eyes. In a flash, her anger dissolved away like a sandcastle on the seashore. She said hastily, hiding her momentary loss of composure, “Yeah, it’s pretty obvious. A battle for hegemony of Shinjuku.”

She went on, “This city is a place that gathers evil in all its forms. Exploit it right and there’s big bucks to be made—by terrorist organizations, crime families, wizards and witches. The assassins for hire under every rock. The seminars for average citizens on the best ways to kill people. Of course the curriculum could be replicated outside of Shinjuku, but those genetic abilities amplified by the magical miasmas of Demon City are priceless. Imagine being able to wield such powers at will, being able to rule over the dark forces in the world—no general or warlock could stop you. It’d be the ruin of every secret society. This city is a cauldron stewing a witch’s brew. The only question is who will be the witch.”

“A fascinating question, to be sure,” came Setsura’s voice from above her, and then away from her. “I have given it some thought. At any rate, my father died without saying a thing about it. But there wouldn’t be much meaning to the fight otherwise. I’m sure Gento Roran feels the same way.”

The last line surely reflected Gento's proposal in Shinjuku Gardens.

"Gento has been out of sight and mind for the past fifteen years. Where the hell's he been all this time?"

"No idea. Except that he definitely wasn't anywhere else but here."

"I find it hard to believe he could be hiding here in Demon City all that time without you noticing once."

"If that's what he did, then that's what makes him an even more formidable opponent." Setsura thought for a moment. "But there's still one thing I don't get—how did this city come to exist anyhow?"

"The Devil Quake."

"Yeah, but why did the Devil Quake occur?"

"There's no point to that question. It's been tying scientists and philosophers and theologians in knots ever since. A magnitude 8.5 megaquake that stopped right at the borders of the ward and didn't even shake the coffee in a cup immediately outside it. Who could begin to comprehend that kind of supernatural phenomenon?"

"Comprehension and the fact that it happened are two different things. Let's try this again. What *caused* the Devil Quake?"

"That I can answer, if you'll settle for fairy tales," Azusa said. Legends on the one hand and history on the other—any kid living in Shinjuku knew which one to believe when push came to shove.

She cleared her throat. "Almost ten years ago, a warlock by the name of Rebi barricaded himself inside his Shinjuku station sanctuary and attempted to sow seeds of evil throughout the world. He and his demon servants were destroyed by a young man. Before he perished, the warlock prophesied that the city would sink into darkness and the human race would know the meaning of its existence for the first time."

"Hell, we're happy when anything here turns out to have a meaning." A rare look of consternation crossed the *senbei* shop owner's face, at once close up, and then further away from her. "Let's assume the Devil Quake was triggered with some ulterior motive in mind. Who caused it? Beyond causing the phenomenon itself, what intent was behind it?"

Azusa didn't answer. Anybody who had anything to do with Shinjuku had pondered those questions at one time or another. And nobody had yet come up with an answer, or even a clue. What did Demon City Shinjuku *mean*?

"That's all I know. Let's hear what comes next."

"Good idea." Azusa straightened. "Let's go then."

"Where to?"

"Where else? The midwife's place."

"She's still alive?"

"Hoh. Something Shinjuku's best P.I. doesn't know? As they say, it's always darkest at the foot of the lighthouse."

"Is that what they say?"

"Whatever. Come on."

The comely doctor strode through the falling twilight, his shadow reaching out behind him.

Among the pedestrians sharing the dusky Okubo Avenue with him were a cyborg, metabolic stabilizers jutting out from its back—an addict strung out on LSD, each belch condensing into the form of a woman or some other related private body part and disappearing just as quickly—a brain-eating roundworm wrapped around the moth-eaten flesh of a sleepwalking zombie—

But all that strangeness yielded as if by natural law to the physician's beauty.

It was a rare occasion in this city when beauty trumped the weird. For this was Mephisto. An exquisiteness that surpassed even Setsura's threw off ripples like small waves that rose up and sank down in the gloom, painting his portrait against a melancholy landscape.

Except that his was an unusual state of mind for the otherwise cool-headed physician, the result of what he had heard and seen just twenty minutes before.

After making rounds that afternoon, he'd paid Mayumi a house call as scheduled. He was running a bit behind schedule. In this case, "a bit" became an eternity.

Armored cars of the Shinjuku police were parked in front of her house. Two dead bodies were being carried out on stretchers. He identified himself and pulled back the sheet. The woman's dead face revealed the extent of the tragedy to him.

The cops filled him in on the details. The man and the woman were brutally slain, the young woman presumed to be the perpetrator was nowhere to be found.

Mephisto looked around the room. The day before, the mother and daughter had come to the old Shinjuku government office building where his hospital now stood. Up to that point, the daughter had killed three men, including her father.

The mother had confessed to having confidentially "dealt with" the bodies of the other two. Mephisto didn't know whether that meant she'd buried them in an unmarked grave, or arranged with the medical examiner to make them disappear, and he didn't much care.

Everyone who'd had sex with her had died. This wasn't a one-off freak of nature, but the kind of phenomenon that got Mephisto's medical juices flowing.

His examinations had yielded no useful data so far. The coroner's report the wife had brought in said only that her husband had died of a coronary infarction. This struck him as a commonsensical conclusion as he had detected no abnormalities in the daughter either.

Except that with the death count up to three, plus the one dying the night before, it was hard to dismiss the connection. The detectives speculated that the daughter must have fled after killing her mother,

who in turn had been driven mad by the man's death.

He was about to leave when a call came in from headquarters that the night before, an eyewitness had observed a girl riding a folding scooter down Okubo Avenue getting nabbed by a biker gang.

This "eyewitness" report came from an information broker representing the eyewitness. The crime database at the police station had matched it to the description sent in by the cops on the scene.

The information broker would forward the reward money to the informant, and would make sure identities weren't leaked. Even taking their cut, brokers promised generous payouts, guaranteed the veracity of the intel they provided, and were fully prepared to punish providers of phony leads.

For that reason alone, the police preferred working with the "professionals," as opposed to civic-minded bystanders.

The detective went to interview the witness. Mephisto accompanied them. He listened to what the man had to say, but did nothing more. The strung-out vagrant couldn't even recall with certainty the gang emblems and colors always emblazoned on the sides of their bikes.

The broker wasn't any more help. "So a bunch of bikers showed up and you thought you could cash in, eh?" spat out the disgusted detective. "These penny-ante outfits got no quality control. The big boys never pull crap like this."

So Mephisto ended up walking the dusky streets alone. He had to wonder about what had happened to her. But he also knew it was beyond his control. In Shinjuku, the time he spent worrying about one patient could be better used to save ten more.

He knew this plain as day, but couldn't shake the image in his mind's eye of the young and pretty girl sitting there in the chair, eyes cast down. He spied a dilapidated telephone booth out of the corner of his eye. There were other ways of gathering information that would reveal the gang's true colors.

Mephisto didn't stop. Sometimes when the wheel of fate turned, all a doctor could do was stay out of the way until it came to a rest. Besides, he had enough on his plate this evening already.

Chapter Three

The midwife's house was in East Gokencho, a prefab not far from what had once been the headquarters of the book wholesaler Tohan Corporation. It had two small rooms, a kitchen and bath. Low-cost housing from one of the earlier reconstruction efforts.

The name plate said "Miyako Naruse."

Setsura rang the doorbell. A white-haired old lady appeared. Her back was so bent over her chin was practically brushing the ground.

When Azusa told her who they were looking for, she replied in a crisp, clear voice that she was the person in question. There was nothing wrong with her hearing either. Without cybernetic implants or rejuvenation drugs, the vigor of her body and spirit shone on her aged face.

As she turned her head to look at them, tears unexpectedly filled her eyes. "You've come back," she said.

"Well, no, I—" Setsura said. His misapprehension was understandable. She'd delivered him twenty some-odd years ago, and he was a full-grown man besides.

"Setsura Aki-chan, isn't it?"

"How about that," Azusa said to herself.

"You remember?" Setsura asked.

The old lady nodded. Tears ran down her cheeks. She made no attempt to wipe them away.

"Of course I do. I was the first one to see your face. Your real face. The first to hold you, before your own mother. You could have become the ugliest man in the world in the meantime and I wouldn't forget. My, my, that look on your face—you seem to have something on your mind."

Azusa smothered a laugh. Even Setsura couldn't hide a wry smile as she led them into the living room.

It was clear that Miyako lived alone. She was well into her seventies. She said she was living on social security and a pension. Now and then a child she'd delivered long ago would show up on her doorstep to show her a child of her own. The kind of thing that made life worth living. No one need feel sorry for her in her present state.

Setsura assured her he did not. They sat down on the dusty tatami mats. He explained that they were looking for more information about

the seal.

“Sure,” she readily agreed. It wouldn’t have been unreasonable to expect that her mind would have begun to yield to the inevitable ravages of age, but this was not the case with Miyako. “The story begins with the night you were born. That day, a tremendous gale was blowing through Shinjuku.”

A small man, bearing the vibe of a wild animal about him, his body bent forward almost to the horizontal, came to visit her. He asked her to come take a trip with him. Miyako thought at first he must be kidding. There were hardly any midwives left in Japan these days, medical technology being fully capable of handling every aspect of the delivery process.

The man shook his head. Miyako and only Miyako would do. This was a child upon whom the fate of the world depended, not the kind of baby who could be trusted to machines.

She didn’t understand what he meant by all that, but if her experience and personal touch was all that important, she might as well accompany him.

At the time, Miyako weighed close to two hundred pounds, but the little man flung her over his shoulder and dashed off at an alarming speed.

“He was faster than a car, and less bumpy, and didn’t slow down in the slightest, even climbing hills. I could imagine myself riding on the back of a tiger.”

With the wind whistling in her ears, almost an hour had passed when a mansion the size of a small mountain rose up before them. There wasn’t a single servant to be seen inside or on the grounds of this strangely modern-looking castle.

The man led her into a room the size of a tennis court covered with tatami mats. An ornate futon was spread out in the very center. Next to the pillow, an old man in traditional Japanese dress directed his solemn gaze down at the person lying on the futon.

A woman with long hair and a pale, waxy complexion. What must have been a once slender face was puffy and swollen. Miyako knew at once that the woman was in dire straits, suffering from a severe case of preeclampsia.

Catching the old man’s attention she indicated this with her eyes. He nodded. *Do what you have to do*, was his silent answer.

That was when they introduced themselves. He was Renjo Aki. He looked to her like a great chess master struggling to claim victory from the jaws of sure defeat.

With no time for small talk, Miyako set to work. It proved to be the most difficult delivery she had ever been confronted with. The birth canal was narrow, the baby’s head large. And then just when the mother pushed with all her might and the baby’s head appeared, a gust of wind

and lightning tore through the room.



The roar filled her ears. The tide of blue fire swept through the room. It seemed that the room itself was being swallowed up by the black clouds and looming darkness outside. Miyako had to repeatedly stifle the impulse to jump up and flee.

Were it not for her determination to bring a new life safely into the world, she would never have accomplished something so strange and wonderful.

The head and shoulders appeared, and with a moist, alive sound the child separated from his mother. Eyes like flowing water, a face that froze Miyako with its sublime beauty.



A flash of electric blue illuminated the room. Shadow and light eclipsed a visage that evinced no sorrow at the inexorable parting nor fear of the brave new world. Not a cry escaped his mouth.

“At that moment, I knew that baby would become an extraordinary person. Every mother believes her child is adorable, but we must always wonder what sort of soul we have brought into the world. What midwife brought Hitler into the world? Surely if she had known beforehand, she would have killed the mother and child rather than give them life.”

She passed the baby to the embrace of Renjo Aki. Renjo told the small man at the rear of the room to put the baby in a crib in the back room. The man’s name was Hyota.

Miyako thought he should be given to the mother, but when she turned back, the pale face indicated that she had quietly passed over to the great beyond, so peacefully that Miyako felt the calm in her own heart as well.

She glanced at her watch. Over two hours had passed since her adventure began.

Without pausing to mourn, Renjo led Miyako to an equally large room. There awaited a resplendent repast, cuisine of a caliber she had never set eyes on before.

Renjo spoke for the first time since he’d introduced himself. He said the boy’s name would be “Setsura.” The house itself had been completed the day before, built big to accommodate a big boy.

Despite the uncanny atmosphere, Miyako thought it beneath her to flee his presence at this juncture. Instead she asked him what kind of

person he wished the boy to be.

That was something he would have to decide for himself, Renjo answered. Only Heaven and Hell could know for certain. All he could say was that Setsura should search out the “seal.”

When Miyako asked him what that was, he turned to her with his deep and dark eyes and wondered aloud if perhaps she could be the one to tell him.

“This seal is apparently a human being, pure and unblemished. When the time comes for it to fulfill its duty, your father said that signs and omens would surely manifest themselves. Have you found it yet?”

Setsura shook his head.

“Well, you’d better be going, then,” she said. “I know at last that your father spoke the truth. That is what led you here as well. God has shown you the way. I cannot say what will happen after this, but you must soldier on regardless. I will pray for your safety and your soul.”

She showed him to the door. Setsura bowed. The eastern sky was tinged with red. A cool breeze washed over their faces. They had gone a few steps when Setsura glanced over his shoulder. The bent-over old lady was still on the front porch looking back at him.

As if she would stand there looking out for him until the sun set for certain.

Azusa leaned against the side of the road buggy. “So, what next?”

The street ran along the West Fifth block. The reconstruction efforts here had fallen behind. Piles of brick and rubble dotted the landscape.

“We start searching for these signs.”

“You got a better clue than that?”

“Not right now. But there are other ways of finding things out in this city.”

“Such as?”

“That’s my secret. I think it’s time for us to go our separate ways.”

“Hold on a second. You trying to give me the slip or something?”

“Don’t see what the slip is. Seems I’m being rather obvious about it.”

“We’re in this together. Sink or swim.”

“I would have thought you’d plenty of material by now.”

“That? You think you got what it takes to do this job?”

“Naw.”

She hiked up her shapely eyebrows. “God, you’re annoying. Hey, that’s right!” She clapped her hands together. “I completely forgot. You owe me! It’s payback time.”

Setsura put on a pained expression.

“Bet there’s a hotel not far from here.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

"All the same to me. We'll just have to ask around. C'mon. You know, I could always find this Gento Roran chap and have a good long chat with him."

She scanned their surroundings and headed for a convenience store next to a pile of rubble. Setsura grimaced but followed her.

"I need to make a call," he said, stopping at the pay phone in front of the store.

"Don't go running away, now," Azusa said with a menacing glare, and stepped into the dim interior. "Anybody home?" she called out.

A stern-looking middle-aged lady appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. She seemed to be in the middle of making dinner. "What do you want?" she asked sweetly.

"There any hotels around here?" Azusa said bluntly. "Love hotels?" Not the sort of thing she had any hang-ups about.

The woman rolled her eyes. "Like I would know about that."

"Well, no problem." Azusa declined to press the matter, and the woman quickly retreated to the back. It shouldn't be *that* hard to find one.

Setsura was just hanging up the phone.

"Where are you going."

"The hospital."

"You not feeling well?"

"Yeah. Bad case of the clap. I guess sex is right out."

Azusa snorted. "Ha, ha. The more you dawdle, the higher the price. Let's take it to the Hilton."

"Sorry, but I've got other business. I've got to head to Kikuicho. We can tend to your wishes afterwards."

The touch of seriousness that crept into Setsura's voice brought a gleam to Azusa's eyes as well. "What's up? I'm not in the mood for grandstanding. This about money?"

"More or less."

In the face of Setsura's cool disregard, Azusa turned on the faucet. "Go ahead," she whimpered. "Do whatever you like. Mark my words, some day you'll end up buried beneath all this rubble just like the owner of this here store."

Setsura furrowed his brows. "The owner of this store?"

"That's right. It's as plain as the nose on your face."

"What is?"

"She hurried out from the back of the store, in the middle of doing something else. She had a bit of dirt stuck to her forehead. Her apron was turned inside out. She must have been digging a hole and didn't have the time to wash her hands thoroughly and the apron was stained brown. Not to mention her brushing me off so fast. Yeah, she's definitely burying bodies back there."

"What are you, Sherlock Holmes?"

Setsura took Azusa by the hand and headed to the buggy.

“Hey, what’s with the rush all of a sudden? A girl likes a little foreplay, don’t you know.”

When Setsura said, “Enough already,” she shrugged and went along for the ride as he pushed her in behind the wheel. He climbed into the passenger’s seat and said, “Drive around for a while.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

“If you say so.”

The buggy took off. With no indication of what he was thinking about, Setsura haphazardly directed her right and then left and then straight ahead.

They turned onto the road that led to Waseda Boulevard, and passed by a funeral home, its recently-completed construction marked with a line of flower bouquet stands.

“Hey, where are we going?”

“Kikuicho.”

“You figure out where the seal is?”

“Hard to say.”

“Then what are you looking for in all this rubble?”

“Who says I’m looking for anything?”

“You think I’m an idiot? We’ve been down every road through and around those ruins. You got some sort of treasure buried in there?”

“Somebody just might.”

“Gento Roran,” Azusa said in a low voice. She gripped the steering wheel.

Setsura didn’t answer, only stared ahead, as still as a statue.

The spectators had been streaming in all evening. It was six o’clock and the stands were full. Eager and expectant eyes focused on the playing field at the base of the bowl-shaped coliseum.

The vast majority had the look of made men, menacing figures in gaudy suits of black and white, radiating an aura of inquisitiveness and a thirst for blood.

Three thousand pairs of eyes were trained on the circular plot of ground. Several yards beneath that, a man in black walked along the reinforced concrete corridor of the subterranean cell blocks.

Now and then, an athlete or manager or official passed by with a *what the hell* glance. It would disappear as they caught a glimpse of his true beauty and they would cast hasty backwards looks at his disappearing figure.

That this was Gento Roran went without saying—except the question of what he was doing there.

He once again peeked into the locker room. It’d been empty a short

time ago. A malevolent vibe struck his cheeks like a brisk gale. It was absorbed without dispersing, as if perplexed by the beauty it encountered there.

The vibe died away. The bodies radiating it had taken note of Gento's true power. These were the top dogs as well. The room held five men. They were sitting on the steel benches bolted to the bare concrete walls. That was the only thing they had in common.

Judged by outward appearances they were quite different. One was ten feet tall, while another rose no higher than Gento's waist. An ordinary-looking man sat next to an old geezer with a long, white beard that reached the floor.

Even without the lockers against the wall opposite, an atmosphere of competitive athletics permeated the locker room, though suffused with a slightly insane gloom and doom that set it apart from the pain and glory that filled the typical sporting arena.

"What'dya want?" asked a small man with long hair sitting on the bench at the back facing Gento. The rest had averted their gaze at the first glance.

"Nothing for now."

Gento stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Perhaps these strange athletes weren't comfortable with somebody who maintained such a cool attitude in their presence, for the rest of them looked at the floor, their feet, and into empty air.

"If you got no reason, then what are you doing here?" said the small man, tying the laces of his high-topped sneakers.

Nobody moved, not even Gento. The air rippled without any forewarning.

Gento's right cheek trembled.

"Ouch," somebody moaned, like the small man, the old man, the big man, and the other two had blurted out at the same time, like a disturbance in the sense of place and distance arose among them.

Gento touched his right cheek. He gazed at the red staining his fingertips. The color of his blood alone he shared with normal people.

"Smells nice, that."

There was no doubt about the speaker this time, the tall, thin man on the bench facing the old man. Arms and fingers like bones covered with flesh-colored paper jutted from the sleeves of his faded cotton suit. He looked more like a living skeleton. His breath was like air being let out of a crypt.

He slowly turned his head, and it almost seemed that the sound of a creaking hinge should accompany the motion. Gento caught a small flash of light, the two dots of red that were the man's eyes.

"We should get together, just the two of us," he said, as if simply moving his tongue took effort. With the silent scraping of rusty metal, his neck returned to its original position.

Gento turned his attention to the dark hulk beside him. The steel bench sagged beneath his weight. The upper half of his body was more a square block. The width of his shoulders, the girth of his chest, the thickness of his upper arms were the same, and half of that must be solid bone.

Get hit by a large truck and the truck would bounce off him.

His hands were the size of a catcher's mitt. Compared to the build of the emaciated man, he would be close to ten feet tall. The sheer density of his mass seemed to warp the space around him.

The big man's eyes were closed. Without the slightest qualm, Gento leaned closer and peered at his face. He had to look up. Sitting down, the man's head towered above Gento.

A human being that was hardly human. If he went on a rampage, King Kong would have a hard time stopping him.

"Quite a piece of work," Gento said almost affectionately. "You've got a body that looks ready for use. Though what's in your mind is another matter."

For the first time, the small man and the old man and the thin man stirred with actual emotion and raised their heads. The big man didn't move, his eyes like a sleeping stone statue. What did he mean by *use*?

Gento turned to the side, to the bench right next to him and the last man sitting there. He appeared completely out of place. He was the same height and build as the thin man, but with meat on his bones. His features were ordinary and warm blooded. Even his dark blue jacket and faded blue slacks fit him. He was the only man there who could possibly be described as "normal."

Gento never got around to addressing him. The big man rose up behind his back and covered his face. Still sitting on the bench, he reached out and without a hint of warning, without disturbing a molecule of air, engulfed Gento's head with his hand. There could be no doubt about the fate that awaited him.

From within the huge clenched fist came the cracking of bones. Everybody else was already looking somewhere else.

"Enough."

This voice brought a halt to the inevitable conclusion. The ordinary-looking man spoke like a good-natured old man warning a misbehaving grandson. A chagrined smile rose to his lips.

The big man's eyes turned toward him. "Stop it," he admonished him again, though in tones more appropriate for telling a small child to *come here this minute*.

The big man responded with unexpected meekness. Gento's head appeared like he was setting a bowling ball down on a pedestal.

"My assumptions were not mistaken. We'll meet again after the competition."

By means of answer, the ordinary man pointed to the door. Gento

left. The corridor was dark and deserted. He climbed the stairs to the upper level and the grandstands. The sultry atmosphere veiled the stars above. The strange air of expectation stung Gento's skin.

This was the Shinjuku Coliseum. Though it sat only three thousand, it was *the* place where any meet that mattered was held. That night, the marquee event featured Demon City's annual hair-raising Death Match.

The men Gento had just visited were none other than the contestants.

The members of the Preying Mantis gang were running full-throttle that evening too. The night before, the word had gotten out that they'd lost their boss, and then in short order, the underboss as well. The second underboss had stepped in at that point, so leadership of the gang was currently unquestioned.

All that occupied their minds now was tonight's prey. The girl the night before was a helluva handful. It was time for some regular fare. Raid a tourist group full of ripe young things, snatch a bunch of MILFs out on the town for a little adventure. Rape and pillage backwards and forwards, right side up and upside down, slaking their burning desires in every wet and warm hole.

Then bury the remains in the ruins. Because that was how it was done in Demon City. These were animals devoid of virtues or morals who nevertheless bore the full weight of responsibility for taking on such brutal natures.

Except that the animals had already been frustrated from eating their fill.

A street buggy was parked outside their headquarters in the ruins of the old Shinjuku Technical High School in San'eicho. Catching sight of the young man standing there, his face like a cool winter moon, their eyes filled with murderous glee. He must be a cop, and they had their own ways of breaking in a rookie.

No need for niceties like introductions. They drew their Japanese swords and charged. The weapons danced through the moonlight. Blood showered from their severed shoulders, staining the asphalt a darker shade of black.

"Where's your boss?" the beautiful genie asked, standing there without a care in the world.

"M-me." The number three man stepped forward. Now that he was number one, he couldn't show fear in front of his underlings. The AutoMag trembled in his right hand, but they probably couldn't tell.

"Last night, somebody grabbed a girl on Okubo Avenue. Where is she?"

His nonchalant manner finally rubbed off on the gang boss. He settled down and rekindled a bit of his courage. "No idea. Who the hell are you?"

He swaggered and thrust out his chest while making sure the gang members on his left and right were readying their automatic pistols. There was no such thing as overkill when it came to cleaning house.

“Playing dumb leaves me in something of a quandary,” said the visitor. “Reliable sources say otherwise. Where is she?”

By this time, the gang boss had noticed the young woman in the driver’s seat of the street buggy. She was one hot babe, and that got the blood flowing to all the right places in a flash. He was already imagining grabbing her ass and giving it to her long and hard.

“Kill him! But don’t touch the woman!”

The cry was answered by a hail of gunfire. But the foe in front of him didn’t scatter to the wind as expected. The gang boss whirled around. His underlings were the ones spouting blood.

He felt himself seized by madness. His own soldiers were firing at each other. The thin thread twined around their necks. Needles of pain they could not resist ordered them to betray their sworn loyalties.

“I’ll ask you one more time,” Setsura Aki said in a low, calm voice, as the gang boss stood there, veiled in the shades of death. “Where is she?”

Three spotlights trained their white beams on one corner of the playing field. According to long tradition, that was where the trophy was displayed.

A murmur shot through the crowd. A young woman lay naked on the grass. She seemed to be floating there in the white, like the sacrificial victim on a funeral pyre wrapped in incandescent flames.

In the stands, a look flashed across the face of the young man in black, a long-forgotten memory springing back to life. He had witnessed the shape of the seal.

Beneath the moonlight, a raven flapped its wings. Like a black cloud carried by the demonic miasmas, it flew over the crumbling mountains of bricks and rubble.

As if exercising some deep magic, this angel of death flew in a straight line from San’eicho to the Shinjuku Coliseum near the Shin-Okubo Station ruins, the hems of his slicker flapping in the wind.

This angel sported the face of Setsura Aki.

To be continued.

Afterword

So what do you think of the first volume of *Maohden*?

As should be clear by now, this novel shares the same main characters as the first volume of *Demon City Blues*. The obvious difference in the two titles is that the latter was a serialization, while *Maohden* was written as a novel (though the second part was published in *Non Novel* magazine).

But in terms of *style*, I chose to make sex and violence the centerpieces of *Maohden*, Vol. I, as opposed to the more lyrical prose of *Demon City Blues*.

I enjoy both approaches, though for an “adult” novel, *Demon City Blues*, Vol. I has received an unusually warm reception from my female readers.

This goes back to discussions from my college days. Originally I was all about the poetics of the prose. My favorite science fiction author was Ray Bradbury and my favorite book was *The Martian Chronicles*. Those old-school stories were all I wrote back then.

Which, to be honest, didn’t amount to a whole lot. The longest thing I did was a ninety-page supernatural script that was staged at a creative retreat I attended.

Kodansha eventually published it in an anthology of my past work. Rereading it now, I can’t help blushing a bit. Suffice it to say that the lyrical mood therein expressed was probably a close reflection of the author’s real self at the time.

In any case, both works play out on the stage of *Demon City Shinjuku*. This time, though, I wish to devote a few words in this afterword to the secret details of its genesis (I suppose it can be called as much).

First there is the influence of film. Here I’m not talking about specific movies, rather the more general problem of the *set* itself. An editor pointed this out to me and I’ve taken note of it since, but my stories predominantly take place in confined spaces.

Of course, that hardly sums up the entirety of my oeuvre (a fan magazine has put my current total of mass-market paperbacks, including translations, at forty-two). Some like *Makaiko* span the Pacific from Los Angeles to Japan. But compared to the rest, these are indeed rare.

For example, *Journey through Hell*, from the young adult *Alien* series, takes place on a ten-mile long Noah's Ark, and in *Mystery Mountain* from the same series, the circuitous passageways winding through the mountain.

In the adult category, the action in *Makaiko*, Vol. III never takes a step away from the shores of Lake Towada.

Even in stories where the protagonist is given comparably more room to maneuver, an underground labyrinth or palace fortress or similarly enclosed metaphorical space is sure to show up.

Taken together, this is what I mean by the problem of the set. As a theatrical stage, the set exists as a place to build other worlds, the modern art of cinematography then being used to display the most ancient of scenes.

Applied to the novel, it becomes possible to write action scenes impossible even today, and precisely because of that, I believe, all the more real.

Within the pages of a novel, the author breathes life into the characters of his own choosing, and places them on a set of his own design. Perhaps the epitome of this in manga form is Go Nagai's *Violence Jack*. He combines the western and the samurai film and contemporizes them to great effect.

I populated Demon City with my lovable assassins, ghosts, gremlins and monsters. Not a whole lot should be read into my choice of Shinjuku. Ginza and Roppongi were out. Shibuya didn't quite make the grade. Shinjuku was the logical choice.

The result, though, is that real places and buildings become stars in their own right. I'm sure some will find such references morbid, but that only reflects the power the author has in dressing the stage to his own satisfaction. It's all an artifice, after all. I invite you to consider everything with a charitable eye.

And that brings us to *Maohden*, Vol. II. The short-term serialization begins with the September edition of Non Novel (going on sale July 22), and will eventually become a novel.

What locations will become the next set, and what special effects and gizmos will populate it? Well, we'll have to wait and see.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Last Year at Marienbad)
Early in the morning of June 11, 1986

MAOH D E N 1

Ten years ago, the demon warlock Rebi Ra nearly unleashed the ultimate weapon in Demon City Shinjuku, but was defeated by Kyoya Izayoi. The city on the edge of the abyss survived by the skin of its teeth.

Now a new hero enters the scene: Setsura Aki the manhunter, as dangerously beautiful as he is just plain dangerous. Demon City's foremost P.I. and erstwhile proprietor of Aki Senbei is heir to his father's legacy and bearer of its burden—he is fated to seek out Gento Roran, the mysterious enemy hidden in Shinjuku's shadows.

Long ago, their fathers fought each other on the ground of Demon City Shinjuku. Renjo Aki's last words to his son were to protect "the seal" and keep it from Gento. But what is this mysterious seal? And where is it hidden?

Gento sends scores of yakuza henchmen after Setsura as well as his lieutenant—the small, twisted creature Hyota. In streets filled with evil miasmas and bloodsucking leeches, Setsura battles his enemies wielding his magical "devil wire."

Meanwhile, the ever-enigmatic Doctor Mephisto begins treating a curious patient: Mayumi, a seemingly normal teenage girl. But every man who has sex with Mayumi dies. While Setsura battles Gento's forces, the Demon Physician must uncover the link between Mayumi and the fate of Shinjuku.

Discover the origins of Setsura Aki, protagonist of the Yashakiden: The Demon Princess series, in the compelling prequel novel series, Maohden.

Hideyuki Kikuchi is the acknowledged master of Japanese horror and urban fantasy with novel series such as Vampire Hunter D and Yashakiden: The Demon Princess, also available from Digital Manga Publishing.

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ISBN 978-1-56970-149-2



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